

This passage is so well known for verse 3:16, it's even considered one of, if not *the* most famous verses in the Bible.

And yet, most people don't know the context in which these words are said.

Most people don't know that Jesus says this famous sentence to a man named Nicodemus in the middle of the night.

You're probably asking yourself, who is Nicodemus and why are they talking in the middle of the night?

Nicodemus was actually a very important person in Jerusalem.

He was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews.

So, presumably, "*Nicodemus had heard enough about what Jesus was up to in Jerusalem to make him think he ought to pay him a visit and find out more.*

On the other hand, as a VIP with a big theological reputation to uphold, he decided it might be just as well to pay it at night.

Better to be at least fairly safe than to be sorry, he thought, so he waited till he thought his neighbors were all asleep.

[Once it was dark and quiet outside, he made his way to Jesus for their nocturnal interview]

What the whole thing boiled down to, Jesus told him, was that unless you got born again, you might as well give up."

(www.frederickbuechner.com, "Nicodemus," May 18, 2016).

I love this passage, because Nicodemus is as confused as any of us might be.

When Jesus tells him he must be born from above, you can tell that Nicodemus is trying to process this in a literal way and it's just not adding up.

He asks, how in the world can anyone be born after growing up?

You want me to just crawl back into my mother's womb and be reborn?

For a Rabbi, he doesn't seem to have an ear for the allegorical, but it's what makes him relatable, we too probably would have been just as confused if Jesus told us we had to be reborn.

Now, you might think that this confused Nicodemus walked away from their late-night conversation completely unchanged, because we don't hear anything else about him in this passage.

But we will hear a bit later on about how this conversation actually did serve to change, or transform, Nicodemus, but for now, let's discuss this infamous passage about being born again, what does it mean?

Do we have any clearer understanding now than Nicodemus did back then?

I don't interpret being born again as a one-time kind of believer's baptism.

I think that our lives are series of experiences in which we are reborn over and over again, to new life in Christ and in our relationship with God.

Being born again is part of our faith journey, it's part of the ongoing work of the Spirit, who, just as Jesus said, blows where it chooses.

The wind blows, it's our job to pay attention to it, to be moved by it, to allow ourselves to be reborn, and bathed in God's love and light and optimism that we then share with the wider world.

Now, I have never given birth, but from what I know, it is a difficult, messy, and painful process.

Hence why it's called labor, literally, because it's hard work.

I don't think being re-born is as easy as making a verbal proclamation, being dipped in water and going on your way.

Being re-born or recommitted to God is often a result very painful experiences.

As I talked about in my sermon last week, with Jesus' temptation in the desert, it's in our lowest moments when we find out where we really stand.

It's often after difficult or painful situations that we're able to see how the Spirit was at work in and through us, at that moment, and therefore have a renewed reliance on something greater than ourselves.

Or maybe we are reborn into living into Jesus' message when we do something that is antithetical to what he taught, and we realize that we said something hurtful or did something self-serving when we should have behaved differently.

There's nothing like the feeling of regret to put us back on the right path.

But all of these experiences, these opportunities for newness of life, are born out of painful ones.

Just like labor, a painful experience in which something beautiful is born out of it.

There's also energy around birth, there's nothing apathetic or passive about it.

Those of us who understand the power of love, who believe in a God of unconditional love and acceptance, should be energized, hopeful, ready to testify to this God of love in our words and our actions.

Jews use the Hebrew words, "ruach," to identify God.

Ruach also means wind, breath, mind and spirit.

Perhaps it is God who is laboring, who is breathing, who is pushing, who is using the wind to move us to a new place in our lives, in our understanding of our relationship with others and our purpose on this earth.

We should allow this spirit, this wind, this breath to move us into a place of deeper faith.

It's our job to allow ourselves to be changed, to not be rigid and fixed, but to be willing to move according to how the spirit blows in our lives.

There are signs all around us in our everyday lives that God is good, that following Jesus' call is the right thing to do, it's our job to see those signs, to allow them to influence us and not write them off as coincidences.

Or, if you have a painful experience, it's your responsibility to be open to the transformation that can happen through it.

The word *metanoia* is a Greek word, and it can be defined as a transformative change of heart; especially: a spiritual conversion.

But I think it's too simplistic to say this is a once and done thing.

Humans are creatures with short attention spans and our allegiances can quickly change.

That's why it's not enough to be reborn one time, but we need to be converted and re-converted over again throughout our lives,

each time we are reminded that to follow God is life-giving, each time we do something, motivated by our faith,

and feel that feeling of reward and satisfaction, knowing that we helped to better someone else's life.

Each time we are moved by someone else's joy or pain and are reminded that we are interconnected and we rise and fall together, we are reborn into our full, spiritual selves.

Now, I know it can be frustrating when we engage with other people who aren't like minded and they behave in ways we don't agree with or they hurt us, but we must, must, remember the sacred rule that we can't change others, we can only change ourselves.

Our job is not to try to change others who believe that punishment equates justice, and that we have to work our way to the top, trampling on others to get there.

They don't get the upside down world of Jesus, that humility and kindness are far more valuable than pride and brazen efforts to promote oneself, that the meek and lowly and quiet of the earth are of far more valuable than the bold and the lofty and the noisy of the earth.

Maybe in time they will get there, perhaps through witnessing our actions, but our job is to stay committed to the upside-down vision of the world that Jesus painted for us, and to be reborn into our commitment over and over and over again.

For if we stop being reborn, if we stop allowing ourselves to be moved by the spirit or ruach, I fear that we will lose our devotion to our Creator, to Jesus and his message.

And we'll become just another one of them, trying to claw our way to the top, only looking out for me and my own.

We also sometimes don't know how our words and actions have a silent impact on others.

I mean, Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus because he takes his words literally and is therefore confused about what Jesus is trying to say.

Then he disappears, with no signs of greater comprehension or faith.

But that's not the last we hear from Nicodemus.

He comes back twice more in the Gospel of John.

In chapter 7, he comes to Jesus' defense!

At first he comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, seemingly skeptical about who this man is, but later on, he defends him in front of his own people, other Pharisees!

They were in the temple with the police, trying to convince them to arrest Jesus.

It was Nicodemus who stood out and said, *"Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"*

He's saying, you can't just arrest him and throw him in jail, he needs a fair hearing.

That's probably as supportive of Jesus as he could be, without getting in trouble himself.

Then Nicodemus reappears again in the Gospel of John, this time after Jesus has been killed.

He accompanies another secret disciple of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, and they went to Jesus' tomb to give him a proper burial.

He brought 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe with him!

And then they wrapped Jesus' body and the spices in linen cloths, according to Jewish burial custom.

I doubt Jesus could have guessed that the Pharisee who once came to him in the dark of night and questioned him, was the one who would help anoint his body for burial after he died.

But at some point in Nicodemus's life, the seed of faith was planted, and the Spirit blew and moved him to go visit Jesus in the dead of night.

And he was reborn in a new way after that meeting which caused him to secretly follow Jesus and his teachings.

He lived into that rebirth in the face of authorities, in the face of fear and death, and yet he was committed to Jesus' upside down world of the Gospel.

Nobody knows what happened to Nicodemus after that

But I do know that he was a lot like us.

Smart, skeptical, not fully understanding, and yet allowed himself to struggle and wrestle with his identity as a Pharisee and his commitment to Jesus.

He had the wisdom and the faith to be reborn in Christ, and each of us has that same wisdom because we are here today, we are part of his community.

It is my prayer for each of you that you continue to allow the spirit to blow through your life, especially through painful, laborious experiences.

So that you might be born and reborn and reborn again over and over throughout this whole life, constantly coming to a deeper understanding of God's love for you and this world.

Because, as that famous scripture says, "God so loved the world,"

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