

A Storytelling Commentary on John 3:1-21

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews;
he came to Jesus by night and said to him,
"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God;
for no one can do these signs that you do
apart from the presence of God."
Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you,
no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?
Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you,
no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born of water and Spirit.
What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'
The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes;
so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"
Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel,
and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know
and testify to what we have seen;
yet you do not receive our testimony.
If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven
except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.
And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.
Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Those who believe in him are not condemned.
But those who do not believe are condemned already,
because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world,

and people loved darkness rather than light
because their deeds were evil.
For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light,
so that their deeds may not be exposed.
But those who do what is true come to the light,
so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

The verbal threads are first of all Jesus' two statements: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again from above," and then, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born again from above." The next element of connection for being "born again from above" is when Jesus says "Don't be astonished that I said to you, you must be born again from above" which is a verbal thread connecting to his first statement. Both of these are expositions of the first statement/puzzle that Jesus gives to Nicodemus.

Another verbal thread, which connects the last two episodes, is the Son of Man and the Son. In the first case, "except the one who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man" and then "the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him;" later "God gave his only son" and "God didn't send the son into the world." These verbal threads connect the often puzzling elements of this story.

The motif that connects the first three episodes of this story is being born again from above. Some translations have "born again" (KJ, NIV) and some have "born from above" (NRSV). This is because the Greek word *anōthen* means both "above" and "again" and both are implied here but normal translation process requires that you translate with only one word. I think it's best to use both words, so in my opinion, "being born again from above" is the best translation. If you translate only "from above," which is the major theme in John and the best one word translation into English, Nicodemus' response—"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can anyone enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born again?"—doesn't make any sense. Nicodemus hears the word as meaning "again" while Jesus' major meaning is "from above."

It is very possible that there is an element of laughter in Nicodemus saying, "How can anyone be born after growing old?" It could have been told as a kind of joke to which Jesus then responds with a somewhat playful response. Regardless of the implied humor, this is rabbinic repartee. It is mutual exploration. There is an element of delight in Jesus saying provocative things that people don't understand and are then invited to explore. This is his way: he invites others to join him in exploring the mysteries of the kingdom of God. I think that spirit is more appropriate than that Jesus is making a series of profound statements. There is a sense of playfulness and rabbinic joy in his statements here. And so his response to Nicodemus, "You are a teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things?" is not a critique, but a nudge spoken with respect. A little Yiddish accent there would be just fine.

In some translations (RSV, NIV) the quotation marks around Jesus' concluding speech are placed at the end of v.15 ("whoever believes in him may have eternal life") and John

3.16-21 has no quotation marks but is punctuated as a narrative comment that is not part of Jesus' speech. (The red letter edition of the NIV shifts from red to black letters at 3.16. The editing of the NRSV makes the identity of the speaker ambiguous by putting 3.16 and 3.17-21 in separate paragraphs with quotations marks around them.) I disagree with these translations. This concluding address in third person is a part of Jesus' speech. It is Jesus' comment that explains why God has sent the Son. There is a change from first person to third person. But this is not an indication that the storyteller stepped out of the character of Jesus and addressed the audience directly as himself in a commentary on Jesus' words. It may be that there is a turn to the audience at this point, the storyteller as Jesus first addressing an imaginary Nicodemus and then turning to address the audience more directly as Nicodemus. The entire speech (3.10-21) is by Jesus, first to Nicodemus and then to the audience as Nicodemus. It is a striking moment in the dynamics of audience address when at 3.16 the storyteller as Jesus addresses the audience even more directly.

This is a continuation of Jesus' explanation of a great mystery. It is the second passion prophecy in the Gospel of John after the implicit prophecy of death and resurrection on the third day in the cleansing of the Temple story (2.19-22). Jesus' statement here—"so must the Son of Man be lifted up"—is a prophecy of his being lifted up on the cross and in the ascension in glory.

The tone of this story is a tone of genuine inquiry and spiritual teaching. Nicodemus is a respected Pharisee with whom the audience is invited to identify. He asks Jesus a question in the context of uncertainty about whether it is really safe for him to be talking with him. So he may ask the question in a secretive tone. The controversy around Jesus is implied as the background of his question. Nicodemus addresses him as "Rabbi" and tells him, "We know that you are one who comes from God." Nicodemus' real question is one that is not stated but which Jesus perceives and responds to. Jesus intuitively asks his question, "How can I get into the kingdom of God?"

As we have identified above, the word in Greek, *anothen*, means both "from above" and "again." The ambiguity of that word is part of the play in Nicodemus' response; Jesus' response is that the word can mean both things. Jesus' explanation is that one must be born of water and the spirit. That is, one must be born from above, from the realm of the spirit. Water clearly refers to baptism. The earlier stories of John the Baptist and the spirit are about being baptized into the spiritual kingdom of God.

The issue, as it is defined by Jesus, is flesh vs. spirit: ethnicity (that is, being born as a Jew) vs. spirituality (being born from above a second time in which ethnicity and genetics doesn't matter). Jesus is addressing the mystery of spiritual rebirth. The wind blowing in its various directions without you knowing where it comes from and where it goes is a metaphor for the spirit. It, in turn, is an allusion to the creation story in Genesis 1 in which the spirit of God blows over the face of the earth and the waters and you don't

know where it comes from or where it is going, but it is a force of creation and new life. That metaphor is the background of Jesus' address here.

It is also clear in the story that Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, not just as himself, but also as a representative of a community. What does it mean when Jesus says, "*We* speak of what we know and *we* bear witness to what *we* have seen, but you do not receive our testimony"? Who is *you*? Who are *we*? *We* refers to the community of Jesus' believers in the period of the telling of this story—sometime in the early 90's. *You* refers to the Pharisees, those with whom Jesus' followers, all of whom are Jews, were in dialogue. When Jesus says, "we speak of what we know and we bear witness to what we have seen," he is speaking about the community of Jesus' believers in the late first century and "you" are the Pharisees who are variously interested in and opposed to belief in Jesus as the Messiah. The contrast is also between *earthly* disbelief and *heavenly* disbelief or the contrast between disbelief and belief. The locus of Jesus' authority as one who can provide new life from above is that the Son of Man is the only one who has ascended *into* heaven, the place from above, and is also the one who has descended *from* heaven.

One of the reasons why this story is included in the period of Lent is that it is also a prophecy of Jesus' passion. That is made explicit in his statement, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The Son of Man being lifted up is an allusion to his being lifted up on the cross. As in the story of the cleansing of the temple, so also here Jesus implicitly is prophesying his suffering, his crucifixion and his resurrection. The words that interpret this prophecy are an explanation of God's motive in sending his only son and of allowing him to be killed. God's motive is that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life by participating in and responding to the love of God that is apparent in this supreme gift of his son. The reason that God sent the son into the world is to save it, not to condemn or judge it.

The rest of the address of Jesus is about this motive. God sent the Son to save people, not to condemn or judge them. And those who believe are already in the kingdom of God. The Greek verb, *krino*, usually translated as "condemned" has a range of meanings: "to judge, think, consider, distinguish." In my opinion, "judged" is a better translation because the context of these statements is the conversation with Nicodemus. Condemnation is a particularly jarring and harsh term. To describe those who do not believe as "judged" is a direct reference to the judgment that those persons have made. Those who have believed are, in Paul's terms, justified, that is judged as righteous. Those who do not believe are already judged because of their continuing to maintain a position of rejection of the one whom God has sent. They have judged themselves by separating themselves from the possibility of this new life.

The appeal of this speech, then, is that the listeners believe and come to the light that is present in Jesus, the Son of God. By coming to the light, they demonstrate that their deeds are done in God. The judgment about whether or not to believe in God and in Jesus as God's Son is a central appeal in this story that continues throughout the Gospel. The

choice is a present reality for every listener to the story. It is a judgment that each person must make.

However, regardless of the decision about the translation, the meaning of this last part of Jesus' speech is shaped as much by the tone as the content. The tone is in continuity with the tone of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus: quiet, playful, firm, aware of the other, conciliatory, and humble. It is the tone of a friend rather than an absolute monarch. It is a tone of love. The impact of the speech is that Jesus loves Nicodemus. The love of God in sending God's Son is communicated and made present in the love that Jesus communicates to Nicodemus.