

Wade in the Water 8: Baptism Water  
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Mark 1:1-9  
John 3:1-9

“. . . born of water and the Spirit.”  
-from John 3:5

Jesus meets up one day with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is important as an individual, just as any individual Jesus met was important to him – Pharisee or pagan, sinner or saint.

But in addition to being who he is, Nicodemus also stands before Jesus this day as a representative of all the best in religion and morality, Jewish, Christian, or any other.

The best religion can produce.

Not someone we would normally think would need to wade in the water. For he is already there.

He is a firm believer in God, a student of the Scriptures, attends worship regularly, teaches a class, a responsible member of the governing body of the community, and is humble in his approach to Jesus

"Teacher," he says, "we know that you are a teacher sent by God. . . ."

Nicodemus is a serious religious inquirer, an honored man of the community, and he just wants to talk with this impressive new teacher named Jesus.

But Jesus is having none of it.

He does not acknowledge that Nicodemus even tries hard.

He doesn't thank Nicodemus for at least seeing that he has something to say.

Nicodemus is saying: "Jesus, maybe I can grow in my faith even more if I talk to you."

But Jesus ignore it.

What a shock treatment.

"In truth, Nicodemus, unless you are born over again, you will not see God at work."

Now, that has to stop anyone short.

He has fulfilled all the duties, and sincerely believes in God.

Jesus doesn't even tell him that is not enough.

Rather, he ignores it, and points to the heart of the problem.

What is Nicodemus to think of it.

Born again . . . right: biologically start all over.

From our side of the dialogue it seems that Nicodemus is rather dense. We, after all, already know what Jesus is talking about. A spiritual rebirth.

But let us use Nicodemus as a type of religious person who is more than most of us will ever be.

It is just as hard for our Christian ears to hear as it was for Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is a dry land kind of guy. He has walked safe and secure on a traditional path. Careful and conservative, Nicodemus has never gotten his feet wet by dunking so much as his big toe in the waters of controversy and doubt, uncertainty and complexity. He has never taken a leap of faith or tossed and turned through a dark night of the soul.

Nicodemus is a by the book, dry land kind of guy.

No wading in the water of risk and commitment for him.

But that is just what Jesus tells him to do.

Did you notice that Jesus says the same thing twice – almost?

But the second time he kicks it up a notch?

First time Jesus says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot **see** the kingdom of God."

Then after Nicodemus protests that being born a second time is impossible, Jesus says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot **enter** the kingdom of God."

Jesus kicks it up a notch in two ways: first, it is not just born anew, now it is very specifically "**born of water and the spirit.**"

And the first time it was "**cannot see the kingdom of God**" now it is the much more serious fate: "**cannot enter the kingdom of God.**"

These two statements are not the same. But the one builds on the other. It intensifies: water and the spirit.

But then Jesus continues, and sets up a contrast: flesh and spirit.

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh,  
and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (3:6)

Our Western minds have a tough time with the word “flesh” – to us it means skin and muscle – the physical body – it sometimes has sexual connotations.

One reading of Jesus' statement here has led hundreds of years of “body-hating.”

One spiritual practice in the Middle Ages was to whip and beat and punish your own body in order to attain the world of the spirit.

But how unlike anything else Jesus ever said and did this interpretation is! Jesus was earthy, and down to earth. He talked about the world we around us. About the presence of the spirit here and now.

So if he did not mean that – what did he mean?

It might help to know that the word “flesh” as Jesus used it and John wrote it simply means the world of human making.

The world of jobs and politics.

The world of churches and organizations.

The world of goals and achievements.

The world of human priorities and self-centered human understandings, the world in short, centered in us, which is the world in which all of us live.

The world in which Nicodemus was a successful businessman and churchman.

And Jesus did not oppose this world. He simply confirmed what deep down Nicodemus already felt – there's more to it than that.

There is a yearning in the human soul for more!

It is as if we spend our whole life waiting to be born.

And many of us never are.

"How can a man be born when he is old?  
Can he enter a second time into  
his mother's womb and be born?" (3:4)

There is nothing wrong with the world in which an infant abides while waiting to be born.

The world in which the infant waits is warm, secure, comforting, nurturing, nourishing.

But it is not all that life is about!

There is more to life.

And, Jesus says, there is more to life than the human centered world of the flesh.

Not that this world is bad – but there's more.

And the more comes of wading in the water – being born of water and the spirit.

So what is blocking Nicodemus – good, religious Nicodemus – from understanding what Jesus is talking about?

Nicodemus obviously believes in God and tries to obey the commandments.

Since he is an honored man, he must follow the commandments pretty closely to have such an esteemed position in the community, among the Pharisees.

But **there** is a clue. Because the Pharisees, like many in the church today, believe in God but believe in a god who is absent.

The God Nicodemus worships is **out there** somewhere.

Nicodemus is walking the traditional path to a God somewhere beyond the bounds of the everyday; he believes and follows the commandments much like a person trying to please an absentee landlord.

He knows that someday the landlord may show up – and he knows that he better keep a clean house for when that day comes – but it is all in the future, out there away from the ordinary life of Nicodemus.

God is kept well away from the ordinary human world in which Nicodemus lives – the world which Jesus calls the world of the flesh.

It is not Jesus who separates the world of the flesh from the world of the spirit, but Nicodemus, and like him, religious persons through the millennia.

Do you remember the first sermon that Jesus ever preached – in all of the gospels?

It was short. Only nine words.

“Repent, for the kingdom of God is **at hand**.”

He said that so long ago.

But we still don't believe it.

“At hand.”

When we hear “kingdom of God,” we think of something coming, if at all, in the distant future to replace this world of flesh in which we live.

And good, believing, religious, Christian people often hope to be born eventually from the old world of the flesh into the new world of the spirit – leaving the old world behind.

Heavenly reward.

Pie in the sky, by and by.

But that is not what Jesus says.

Jesus says the world of the spirit is **at hand** now.

For those who are born of water and the spirit.

Let me translate “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” into 21<sup>st</sup> century language: “Get with it people, God is here and now!” Jesus says.

Jesus says, the world of the spirit has invaded the world of the flesh – the world of human affairs – the world of politics and jobs – the world of success and failure – achievement and disappointment.

Flesh is flesh and spirit is spirit, and what you are being reborn to see is that God's spirit is blowing through this world now. God is no longer absentee landlord.

So wade in the water and come into the kingdom.

We sometimes forget that Jesus did not come into the world to found the Christian church.

As if the church were therefore an end in itself.

Jesus came into the world to set God's Spirit into human hearts.

Like the wind, blowing where it will, penetrating every crevice and cranny.

The world of the spirit has penetrated the world of the flesh. Jesus says.

And we, like Nicodemus, want to ask, how is this possible?

For Nicodemus is us.

We are firm believers in God.

We think it is good to be students of scripture.

We attend worship regularly.

We believe it is important to teach faith to the young.

We try to help others.

We want to be responsible members of the community.

Like Nicodemus, we would approach Jesus humbly.

But most of all, we too spend most of our lives worshiping God who is like an absentee landlord.

Jesus gave Nicodemus the shock treatment.

"All you have been doing doesn't amount to a hill of beans, Nico, because you have missed that you gotta wade in the water of the spirit!"

We are so like Nicodemus.

The spirit is something that happens to very religious people, like the people in the bible, or saints.

It doesn't happen to us.

The best we can do is believe in a God who is somewhere out there – and try to figure out how to please that absentee landlord God for the time when we will finally meet – may that be a long time off!

To understand that God is here and now.

That God is close as breath and real as our fears.

That God is in every human relationship.

That the spirit of God is the breath of life that picks us up and brings goodness.

That God is in every casual conversation and unformed thought.

That God is as close as the way we treat our wives and husbands, children and neighbors – or as far away.

To understand that the spirit of God flows in, around and through every corner of this world of the flesh – flows like water.

Flows like the baptism water on the head.

Flows like the Jordan River at flood.

Flows like the storm that leaves nothing in its path the way it was before.

To comprehend this is like being born again – seeing the kingdom of God.

To wade in that water is being born of water and the spirit – entering the kingdom of God, here and now.

Ah, friends, I like it better the other way.

It isn't as scary if Christianity is just another religion.

I like it better if we just have to come to church, study the scriptures, teach the young, and be responsible citizens.

I like it better that way.

So do you.

And so did Nicodemus.

Can we be born of water and the spirit?

Can we be born brand new to see that the fundamental message of Jesus is that the spirit is here and now flooding through our lives?

After you wade in the water of that flood, nothing can ever be the same again.

When God fills your life, every moment, every thought, every conversation becomes holy.

We live our lives on sacred ground.

God is not an absentee landlord.

Turn around, Jesus says.

Turn around and wade in the water of the spirit.

For God is here,

God is now.

In you.

Amen