

New Birth and the Spirit

Genesis 12: 1-4; John 3: 1-17

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My old teacher, Fred Craddock, was giving lecture at a seminary or divinity school. He worked hard on preparing it and worked in delivering it. Dr. Craddock is a fine New Testament scholar in addition to being a great preacher, and this lecture dealt with complexities in the theology of the New Testament and its ramifications for the church today. When he was finished, he was exhausted, his shirt was soaked with perspiration, his brow was wet, and a student bounded up to him and said, “Well, it guess it all boils down to ‘God helps those who help themselves.’” Dr. Craddock reflected later upon what he called, “shrink-wrapped” theology; theology that is reduced to bumper-stickers, aphorisms, and bullet points on a power-point presentation. How can we, the church, be responsible for the teaching of the Creator of the Universe, the Redeemer of the Cosmos, and the Sustainer of all that we know that is Good, and end up with such a reduced, pallid, and insipid understanding of that God?

I remember driving down the highway with Ray Vickrey, the now retired pastor of Royal Lane Baptist in Dallas, and a car rapidly passed us while moving in and out of lanes; it had a bumper-sticker, “God is my co-pilot.” Ray said, “If God is your co-pilot, then that means that you must be the pilot. I think I’ll take another flight.”

Carlyle Marney used to say after hearing some Fundamentalist clap-trap, that someone had “sheared off the reality of God to fit through the narrow slits of their own mind.”

But before we chuckle at naive students and Fundamentalist preachers or pat ourselves on the back for our breadth, and depth, and vision, we should admit that shrunken faith, reduced religion, squeezing God into a human-sized box, is a problem for all religious thinking, and for even the most resourceful and faithful among us. The truth is, we have no other way to think about God without references to ourselves, analogies, images, and metaphors. Karl Barth said that much of what we say of God is “man” or “human” said in a loud voice. The awareness of this caused theologians of a previous generation to tremble. “What are you doing . . . with the word of God upon your lips? Did one ever hear of such overweening presumption?” asked Barth.

Indeed, presumption is what Nicodemus brings to the table in his nighttime conversation with Jesus. Sometimes we imagine that Nicodemus must have been a restless seeker, slipping away secretly to Jesus under the cover of darkness to wrestle with his doubts. But the writer of John actually presents another view. At first, anyway, Nicodemus is the picture of confidence and sure knowledge. “Rabbi, we know. . .” are the very first words out of his mouth. There is a confidence here, a setting of the agenda that borders on smugness. “Let’s talk, professor to professor, Jesus. All is under control. We know.” He speaks not only for himself, but for the religious establishment he represents: “We know...”

Remember that it says that Nicodemus is a “leader of the Jews” and a Pharisee. Many scholars believe he was likely a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the equivalent to a religious-political-academic Supreme Court, and one was

not on the Sanhedrin without proper credentials, training, and connections. Nicodemus was an accomplished and knowledgeable man who was coming to Jesus under cover of night so no one would see him. And while he was indeed searching and asking questions of Jesus, he was operating out of his own presumptions. He knows. He knows who God is, what the Bible says, and what the Tradition teaches. He knows.

Furthermore, Nicodemus and his cohorts are confident that they know the source of Jesus' deeds and have his ministry sized-up. They know the limits to divine action, how God can and cannot work in the world. They know what Jesus is supposed to do and what he is supposed to say.

Nicodemus and his friends are more sophisticated than bumper-stickers and power-points but they've got God and Jesus in their own boxes just the same.

Soren Kierkegaard warned against every attempt to trivialize faith; every effort to label God, and know God according to our agenda. In his book *Fear and Trembling* he said that the way of faith does not serve our fantasies, our illusions, or our ambitions. Faith is not the way to God on our terms; it is the way of God to us on his terms.

As Jenny Henson said a few minutes ago, "Christian actions, on my own terms, are not enough." Indeed, Christian actions, Christian beliefs, Christian anything – on our own terms – won't work. All of it is about control. We think "we know."

"No you don't know," said Jesus. "No one can really know what is possible with God unless one is born from above, born anew, born of the Spirit." With his opening response to Nicodemus, Jesus knocks down the walls, moves outside the boxes, fractures the categories.

“How can this be? How can this be?” The rest of Nicodemus’ conversation can be summed up by this refrain, by his frustrating attempt to repair the boxes that Jesus was systematically dismantling. Jesus was wandering dangerously into the wild and unexplored territory of the Spirit, into the unknown, and Nicodemus wanted to rope him back into the safe regions of “we know,” of his own provincial religious map.

W. H. Auden once observed that it is hard to be a Christian if one is not a poet. Auden was pointing not only to the poet’s reverence for the power of language, but also to the poet’s awareness of mystery, of the stammering of language after the unknowable.

Theologian R.E.C. Browne once advised young ministers that, if they were to be good preachers, they would need “an essential untidiness of mind,” to be able to think outside organized neat categories.

In her introduction to the writings of Raymond Carver, his wife, Tess Gallagher, tells of finding a crumpled list in his shirt pocket that read, “eggs, peanut butter, hot choc,” and, then, after a space, “Australia?, Antarctica??” Peanut butter and Antarctica? Perhaps, Gallagher mused, Carver’s effectiveness as a writer came from this strange mixing of categories, the breaking down of boxes, of being able to think outside of convention.

“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above,’” Jesus said to Nicodemus, breaking down the boxes, stretching the limits of the possible. “The wind of God’s Spirit blows where it chooses, and it is beyond your knowing.” To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to be willing to have our categories redefined, our “God boxes” and “church boxes” dismantled, to be blown by the Spirit into places one would never have dreamed of going. It means to give up our

efforts at control, give up our agenda, and start over so completely that the only way to describe it is being born anew, born of the Spirit. As Jesus put it to Nicodemus, to be a child of God, born of the Spirit, is to “come to the light,” even when it shines outside the mirrored boxes where we thought we had all the reflections of God's truth trapped.

Last week, I had the great privilege to spend some time with Eugene Peterson. Besides translating the Bible into what is called *The Message*, he has written thirty books on being a pastor and the Christian life, and he spent 29 years as the pastor of a small Presbyterian church in the suburbs of Baltimore, before spending the last 15 teaching in seminary. Peterson’s newest book is his memoir called simply *The Pastor*. In it he tells of one of those times, he learned he had to change and think and live differently from how he had always thought and lived before. He had been a pastor for three years and had just completed the building of a new church building and the organizing of a new church. He says:

Up until this time I had lived from goal to goal. School had been about making good grades; jobs had been about pay raises and promotions. Winning games in basketball and winning races in track defined who I was throughout my adolescence. I began my life as a pastor by being given goals to meet: gather a congregation, become self-sufficient financially, build a sanctuary. I was a competitor. I had always been a competitor. Competition brought the best out of me. It is what I did best. Competition had brought me a long way...

He went on, I was addicted to adrenalin. And now I was realizing how my already well-honed competitive instincts were exacerbated by the competitive and consumerist church culture that surrounded me... My competitive skills and

achievements were virtually worthless. Worse than worthless: actively destructive. (p. 208, 210).

Peterson had to learn that the wind of God blows where it wills and he could not control it or keep it organized on his own competitive terms.

In the early days of the AIDS epidemic, one of New York City's most courageous and tireless workers against the disease was a physician by the name of Joyce Wallace. To help stem the tide of the virus, Dr. Wallace allowed herself to be blown by the wind of the Spirit in new directions; she followed the light of God into dark places, not only treating infected patients but also cruising the West Side of Manhattan in a specially equipped medical van, paying prostitutes \$20 to be tested on the spot for AIDS. Though she experienced the skepticism of her medical colleagues and the daily disappointments of seeing patient after patient die, she refused to be dissuaded from her mission or confined by the conventional definitions of what was possible.

In fact, she drew inspiration in this breaking of the boundaries from her mother, a teacher of brain-injured children. One particularly powerful memory was when her mother had her class stage a production of *My Fair Lady*, and she gave the lead role to a little girl in a wheelchair. It never occurred to her mother, reported Dr. Wallace, that the audience, so conditioned by life's boundaries of possible and impossible, would weep when the little girl rolled herself across the stage singing, "I could have danced all night."

"If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe," Jesus asked Nicodemus, "how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" Jesus was not moving Nicodemus toward a new theology, but toward a new life, a new way of wonder and worship. The point was not for Nicodemus to replace his little

theological boxes with slightly larger versions, but to fall on his knees in repentance, to beg God for forgiveness for all arrogant thinking, and then to be carried along by the Spirit's breeze into a life not of his own making.

We are a church that thinks. That's good. We want to think seriously about God and life and the church. But we want our thinking and our planning and our serving and organizing and teaching to be tempered by reverence and humility, by the realization that all of our thoughts about God are halting attempts to come in wonder and worship to the blazing light of God. Rather than coming in the door thinking, "We know," perhaps it might be better to come thinking, "We don't know."

So whatever happened to Nicodemus? We will see him again; this time not at the beginning of John's Gospel but at the end of it. Jesus is dead, crucified, and there is Nicodemus. This time, however, he comes not as an interrogator but as a disciple, not as an apostle of the night but a follower of the light. Now, he does not say, "We know." Indeed, he says nothing; he simply comes, bearing spices of worship and praise and hope, whose aroma will be carried by the wind that blows where it will.

May it be so with us.

Amen and amen.