



The Lessons We Learn from the People We Meet

Along the Way

Nicodemus (Blessed are the Mind-Blown)

John 3:1-17

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

March 5, 2023

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 unless God is with that person." 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 the 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."

Nicodemus is a curious fellow. We're given mixed signals about him, and for that reason, he is often considered "one of the most intriguing, yet elusive"¹ characters found anywhere in scripture. He is a leader among his Jewish people, a prominent member of society. He has all the right connections, attended all the right schools, makes appearances at all the right events, and gives generously to all the right organizations. He is one of those people who cannot enter a room unnoticed, even if he tries, because on top of everything else, Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin Council.

The Sanhedrin Council was the ancient Jewish equivalent of our United States Supreme Court. It was the highest legal and religious authority in Jewish life, whose most important mission was to interpret Biblical law. To be appointed, you had to be well-versed in the Torah and in general sciences, including math and medicine. You had to be fluent in multiple language. And you had to conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the respect given to the position. So on the one hand, Nicodemus is an impressive figure within his own community. There's no denying that. On the other hand, though, when it comes to our story, he visits Jesus at night and seems unable to voice whatever his actual question might be. On top of that, despite his intelligence, he is completely befuddled by everything Jesus has to say, lost in misunderstanding and literalism. By the end of the reading, he has simply faded out of sight.

Intriguing. Elusive. Curious.

If and when the time ever comes for people to evaluate or analyze my life, or my ministry, or really anything about me, I hope and I pray that those engaged in the task would be both patient and gracious in

their work. I imagine you might feel the same way. And if we, in turn, are patient and gracious with Nicodemus, he, too, may prove to be a teacher in his own right.

At the heart of his conversation with Jesus is the whole idea of being born from above, or, as Nicodemus puts it, born again. Notice, though, that Jesus issues a corrective immediately. "That's not what I said," Jesus replies, which means I'd encourage us to set aside all of the baggage that spills open, sometimes in an embarrassing manner, when our modern ears hear "born again." Because if I understand the text, our relatively recent evangelical obsession with this phrase may be based on an incomplete interpretation. So set that aside as best you can for now.

Jesus says no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, and Nicodemus asks, "How can anyone be born again? How on earth could someone re-enter their mother's womb to be born a second time?" The word causing all of the confusion is *anōthen*, which can be translated "anew" or "from above." Nicodemus reaches for a literal interpretation, prompting Jesus to issue a gentle corrective. "Not born again," he says, "born of water and the Spirit. Born from above. How on earth, Nicodemus? Not on earth at all. From above, Nicodemus. From above."

Jesus doesn't just leave it there, though. He goes on to say, "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. That's what it's like to be born of the Spirit. To be born from above." That seems to blow Nicodemus' mind, because all he can manage after that is, "How can this be?" Those are his last words on the subject. We will see him again, though, a bit later. Nicodemus isn't done with Jesus. He doesn't write him off. Which means when we hear, "How can this be?" we aren't hearing dismissal or even disbelief. In light of the fact that Nicodemus will return later in the Gospel, I think we're hearing wonder. Awe. Astonishment.

My friend Taylor is a pastor in Georgia — I've mentioned her before. Taylor has two children. Hank is the oldest by a few years. For the early part of Hank's life they lived in a big city, meaning night was never all that dark. So Taylor and her husband decided to drive out to the countryside, where it would be darker than dark, to look at the stars. And Taylor said after the first time she told Hank to look up, he gasped so loudly that she started recording his reaction on her phone. She shared the recording with me, and for several seconds, all you can hear is another toddler-sized gasp, and then you hear a little voice say, "'tars," because that was how he said stars at the time. "'tars. 'tars," whispered over and over. And it's only an audio recording, but then I swear you can see the image of realization dawning on him, and he says loudly and excitedly, "Like the song!" "What song, buddy?" And that little voice starts singing, "Twinkle, twinkle little star." It fades quickly, though, and after some silence, the whisper returns: "'tars. 'tars."

That might be the clearest expression of wonder and awe I've ever heard recorded. But I think Nicodemus was also astonished by what he saw late at night. Surely there were stars in his sky, too, but what he was seeing was Jesus in a new light.

Bill Brown, professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary and highly respected scholar in his field wrote a book a few years back about the importance of wonder when it comes to experiencing God's Word and God's world.² "The term wonder covers a wide range of experiences," he writes, "but the common factor is that wonder is naturally desired. We are born with a hunger for wonder firmly rooted in the human psyche." He quotes bioanthropologist Melvin Konner, who says, "The capacity for wonder is the hallmark of our species and the central feature of the human spirit." Those who study wonder call it an emotional response, something that cannot be willed into existence, though we can cultivate a greater awareness of it. We might even consider developing our awareness of wonder to be a spiritual practice, because as Bill Brown writes, "Common to all experiences of wonder is their power to attract, immediately or ultimately, rather than to repel. Wonder draws us forward. It beckons us, all the while shattering our preconceptions, disclosing new possibilities, and revealing reality previously unknown." Wonder, then, may unsettle us, but never ultimately. "Wonder is relational, because it is all about encounter. It is as if the object

or source of wonder reaches out and grabs us, shakes us, puzzles us, disturbs us, but then embraces us. Wonder draws us in.”

When I think about wonder in my life, some of the first things that come to mind are stunning moments in creation, like the first time I saw the Grand Canyon, or the first morning I sat on a rock over a lake in the Canadian wilderness and watched loons skimming along the water. What also comes to mind is every single little baby I’ve ever held, marveling at how the human body starts out so tiny, captivated by watching them discover their foot for the first time. What came to mind earlier in this service is what wonder is activated in me every time John plays the clarinet for us. I imagine you, like me, might readily think of all sorts of things like that. I suggest to you, though, that wonder exists can and does exist in much more ordinary moments, too.

I was in 10th grade, I think, when we got a new Pastoral Minister at my Catholic high school — and it was a woman. A woman in her 20s. I have to admit to you: that was, to me, at that time, utterly astonishing to me. I had never known of such a thing. “I’m going to have to see this for myself,” I thought. I went down to her office and introduced myself, only to discover that she was, in fact, a woman in her 20s, and she was, in fact, real and human, and she was kind and gracious and even a little bit funny, but even more than that, there was something about her I couldn’t figure out at the time. I would later have all sorts of conversations with her about faith, but I could see it in her even when I didn’t know what it was. There was something about her that made me wonder, that made me marvel, that made me want to know more. I was 14 years old when I met her, and she was present 15 years later when I was ordained, and I am entirely confident that I would not be standing here with all of you, had it not been for her.

Wonder can dwell in creation, but wonder can dwell within each of us, too. Wonder, I think, can dwell anywhere — we just have to let ourselves see it, and experience it, and maybe even, as the old hymn goes, lose ourselves within it. I don’t know what, exactly, Nicodemus thought about everything that Jesus kept talking about. About the lifting up of a serpent back in ancient days and about how God so loves the world every day and about how the world might be saved through the Son. I don’t know what he thought about it, or even how much of it he heard. But I do know that throughout his encounter with Jesus, he heard enough to wonder. I do know that Nicodemus might be a very fine example of what wonder can do in a life. Because his experience with Jesus did everything those scholars of wonder say it will. It shook him up, puzzled him, disturbed him, and then ultimately embraced him. It drew him in. And the reason I know this to be so is that Nicodemus shows up again in the Gospel of John. Two more times, actually. In chapter 7 he reminds his Sanhedrin colleagues that the law required a hearing before Jesus could be ruled against, and in chapter 19 he assists Joseph of Arimathea in the holy task of preparing Jesus’ body for burial.

Some scholars argue that in Nicodemus, we see someone who improves, but who never actually makes a confession of faith. That may be so, but there are times when actions speak louder than words, and his actions were in direct contradiction to the Sanhedrin’s. If Nicodemus didn’t know complete understanding and transformation, he was surely on his way, which is more than enough for God to keep working with. Because that’s what God’s love does. It keeps working with us. Which means it will keep astonishing us. It will keep giving us reason upon reason to wonder in the fullest sense of the word.

I think it’s instructive we don’t hear about heaven and eternal life and salvation and God’s love for the world until after we, with Nicodemus, have been given reason to wonder. If I understand the text, it means we actually don’t *have* to understand everything about heaven and eternal life and salvation and God’s love for the world. All we really *have* to do is marvel, and hold it with a sense of wonder, and ultimately give thanks.

Sermons from Shandon Presbyterian Church

¹ From a draft manuscript of a forthcoming book by Frances Taylor Gench of Union Presbyterian Seminary.

² *Sacred Sense: Discovering Wonder in God's Word and God's World*, by William P. Brown.