

## Anew from Above

Have you ever gone into a situation where you started out feeling confident and well-prepared—whether it was a meeting, a presentation, an interview, or even an examination—and then, after it began, you found out that you were in way over your head?

Maybe that's how it is for Nicodemus in this Sunday's Gospel reading. John tells us right up front that Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Now when we hear about the Pharisees of Jesus' day, we've gotten used to picturing them strutting around with a certain swagger and smugness, as religious leaders who know more—or *think* they know more—about faith and doctrine than the average person does.

At the beginning of his meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus sounds pretty sure of himself. After all, he possesses a certain status. He's a member of the Sanhēdrin. A member of the ruling council. But as his conversation with Jesus progresses, Nicodemus grows increasingly puzzled and perplexed. His visit to Jesus takes place under the cover of darkness. At night. And

in the Fourth Gospel, night represents a time of confusion and misunderstanding. In John's Gospel, many of those who encounter Jesus don't realize that his words have more than one level of meaning. And Nicodemus is no exception. He takes everything Jesus says at face value.

Do you think this narrative could be a cautionary tale for you and me? Do we need to be careful about assuming that every word in the Bible has just one meaning—the literal meaning? Do we ever take sacred Scripture so literally that we interpret it to mean only what the words say on their most basic level, and nothing more? That's what Nicodemus does.

After he hears Jesus talking about a second birth, Nicodemus wants to know how a grown adult—a senior citizen—can get back into the mother's womb and be born again. When Jesus speaks about being reborn, Nicodemus asks "How can these things be?" He doesn't comprehend. Not yet.

But this isn't the last time in the Gospel that we'll see him. There's hope for old Nicodemus. Somewhere along the way, Nicodemus will experience exactly what he's heard Jesus speak of: another birth.

A second birth. Now I know we're in the month of May. This isn't December. But thinking about this second birth reminds me one of our favorite Christmas carols, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," Charles Wesley's hymn to the One who was *born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth*.

What characterizes this second birth? During our time together today, let's reflect on what this rebirth means.

We've heard Jesus' teaching on a different kind of birth. But most of our English-language versions of the Bible translate these words of Jesus as either *born from above* or *born again*.

Born again. Now some faith traditions have picked up this phrase and used it as the gold standard—the one test of a real Christian. And being born again *is* part of what Jesus is talking about. But it's only a part. It's not all. And it's important that we understand Jesus' meaning in its fullness.

The thing is, in the original language of the Gospel, there's a special word for this kind of birth. That word is *anōthen*. *Anōthen* has a dual meaning. It does indeed mean *again*. *Anew*. And it also means *from above*. We are intended to hear *both* meanings and to hold them together. What Jesus is actually saying is this: *You must be born anew from above*.

This birth is different from physical birth. It has another dimension: from above. And it happens at another time. It happens anew.

Being born anew from above—this other locus and time of being born—makes us think of what it’s like to be adopted. When a child is adopted, it’s as though he or she is being born all over again. This son, this daughter doesn’t come to the parents in the customary manner of biological children. And usually, his or her life with the adoptive parents is nothing like it was before the miracle of adoption. The adopted child is *chosen* by the parent. And the adopted child is loved with a deep and tender love.

Ask any adoptive parent. They’ll tell you. I’m an adoptive mom myself. There’s a marvelous message an adoptive mom can give her beloved son or daughter, something she wants her child to know and remember. It goes like this: *Never forget for a single minute—you didn’t grow under my heart, but in it!*

Being born anew from above is like what happens when you’re adopted. You receive a second chance. You’re reborn into a new family. You begin a new life. You’ve been adopted. The

apostle Paul, in his letter to Christians in Rome, assures them—and you—that *you have received a spirit of adoption*.

It's all new. You enter into a new relationship with the One who never stops seeking, never stops finding, never stops reaching out, never stops saving. This is the One you're now invited to call *Abba*—a name, like *Daddy* or *Papa*, that suggests an intimate relationship with a loving parent. A familial relationship.

You've been brought into God's family. You've been incorporated into the family of God. You've been baptized.

Baptism is a sign of being born anew from above. Even though these two things might not happen at the same moment. Being born anew, being born from above, being born by water and the Spirit, is God's act of grace. We baptize in the name of the one God, who reveals Godself to us in three persons. We baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Thomas Long shares the story of “one Sunday service in which [a pastor] was baptizing a two-year-old boy. After the child had been baptized with water, [the pastor], following the directions of [his denomination's] prayer book, put his hand on

the little boy's head and addressed him in Trinitarian language. He said, 'You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.' Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, 'Uh-oh'...

That 'uh-oh' was a recognition that everything had changed. This boy would never be the same. He did not belong any more just to his biological family; he had now been born all over again, this time into God's Trinitarian family."

And he didn't have any control over it.

Being born anew from above is not something you have any more control over than you did over that first, physical birth. That first, physical birth required more work on the part of your parents than it did on your part. Being born anew from above requires more work on God's part than it does on your part.

This rebirth isn't something you *decide* to do. It's not something you do of your own volition. It's something that happens *to* you through the Holy Spirit.

Through the Spirit of God. Just as you can't control or harness or restrain the wind, neither can you control or harness or restrain the Holy Spirit. The Spirit blows where it will. And the Spirit will surely lead you where you don't expect to go. If

you are Spirit-led, you are a child of God. And God's Spirit-led children have a new way of being in the world, a radical way of being that's shaped by the upside-down nature of the realm Jesus kept showing us with his words and with his example. This is a way that takes the world's arrogance and pride and self-promotion and overturns them into humility and compassion and kindness. This is a way in which the last are first. This is a way in which the least are greatest.

And this way of being in the world is all about the transforming of the Holy Spirit, birthing you anew from above. You are never again the same. You sense, you feel, you experience the power of God's life-changing Spirit, dancing into your innermost places. Dwelling within. Guiding and giving understanding. Sustaining and sanctifying. And restoring in you the image of the triune God, the very image in which you have been created.

This restoration by the Spirit is a process. It's a journey. You and I aren't reborn fully mature, any more than we were born fully mature the first time. We're born as infants who need care. We don't need to worry about being in over our heads—like Nicodemus was—because we trust a community of faith to

feed us and nurture us and help us grow into believers who are able and willing to care for others even as we ourselves have been cared for.

You are a community born not only anew, but born also from above, through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross, through the raising up of Jesus on the day of resurrection, and through the ascension of Jesus into the presence of the Father. By the grace of God, you are reborn into believing community.

So on this Trinity Sunday, celebrate! The Trinity is deep, deep mystery. But the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved, not a riddle to be figured out, not an enigma to be explained. The Trinity is a gift to be embraced. You are born anew from above. Born to begin a new life, a joyful life, a kingdom life. A life of being drawn ever-closer into the community of self-giving love, into the ever-moving, everlasting circle of our God who is One in three and three in One.

Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.