

“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.”

I don't know about you, but for me this verse has been so over-used and misused that it's become almost trite. It's written on posters held by spectators at athletic events, on signs in front of small businesses, and we hear it in the “comfortable words” of our Rite I liturgy. Sometimes it's shown just as chapter and verse: John 3:16. When I see it that way, I wonder how anyone who isn't a reader of the bible or a follower of Christ could ever know what it means. It is *not*, in my opinion, a wonderful tool for evangelism.

There's another verse in this passage that might give us pause, verse 3. “Jesus answered him, very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Although Jesus clarifies that he means being born of water and Spirit, an experience we associate with our baptisms, the phrase “born again” is interpreted by some Christians to refer to the specific moment in time when one accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. For those of us who have never known a time when we were not Christians, the question “are you born again” and its companion, “are you saved” puts us on the spot and leaves us mumbling for a defense of something we can't really explain.

Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian, wrote about the difference between followers and admirers in a way that might give us food for thought about faith. In his view, “a follower is an adherent to a way of life, not just to a set of teachings. Such an individual strives with all his strength to be what he admires through his action. In contrast, an admirer is more like a spectator who remains detached, keeps a safe distance, and admires the truth instead of following it. An admirer never makes any sacrifices, always plays it safe, and does not let his life express what it is he admires.”¹

Today's story about Nicodemus follows John's version of the cleansing of the temple, the story we heard last week from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' ministry is still young and there's no mention of Nicodemus until today's passage, so we don't know what drew him to visit Jesus. Perhaps Nicodemus saw or heard about Jesus' confrontation with the money changers. Maybe he heard Jesus say “Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up.” Or maybe he heard about Jesus from the other Pharisees, who surely were discussing him privately. Whatever the reason, Nicodemus was curious about what Jesus was saying and doing. But, like the other Pharisees, he had an obligation to protect the faith and its traditions—not to mention his own reputation. The Pharisees could ill afford to give credence to Jesus' teachings, many of which directly contradicted what they themselves taught about faith and the law and about right relationship with God. For Nicodemus to seek Jesus openly would put him at risk of conflict with his peers. It could destroy his reputation and diminish his position of leadership. So Nicodemus goes to Jesus at night.

Nicodemus has just begun their conversation by complimenting Jesus, acknowledging that he is a teacher who comes from God, when Jesus pipes in and tells him he must be born again. “What do you mean?” Nicodemus asks. He wants an explanation, preferably something concrete or literal—something substantive he can use in a conversation or argument with others; an answer that will justify his fascination with Jesus. But Jesus' responds with metaphors and symbols that represent reality and truth without being factual.

Like the other Pharisees, Nicodemus was a keeper of the law and Jewish traditions. The Pharisees devoted their lives to learning and interpreting Torah, often debating or disagreeing about what was meant and how it should be put into practice. We might call Nicodemus an “intellectual,” who relies on facts as the basis of what he believes. But in words that are anything *but* concrete or literal, Jesus tells him that faith resides in a spiritual domain where it often makes sense only to

the one who experiences it. We don't know how Nicodemus responded to what Jesus said; we hear nothing else about him until the seventh chapter of John, when Nicodemus defended Jesus before the Pharisees, and again after Jesus' crucifixion, when Nicodemus brought spices to anoint Jesus' body. Maybe his conversation with Jesus meant more to Nicodemus than we know. Faith is often started with something we might not notice. Maybe that was the beginning of transformation, a point from which he could begin to combine what he *knew* with what he *felt* when he was with Jesus.

With Abram, however, there is no question about faith. God said "go," and Abram went. An old man and his old, childless wife left family and everything familiar to them in obedience to God's call. Yes, God promised them abundant blessings, but God's words were their only assurance. Were there doubts about this journey, unasked questions? Will we like it there? Will there be plenty of food and water? Will we make it there without dying first? What is the danger from the desert we'll cross and from the people we meet along the way? We don't know about questions; we assume that only a man and a woman of deep faith would just pick up and go.

What a contrast there is between Abram and Nicodemus. We might be tempted to say that Nicodemus had knowledge but not faith. We might guess that Abram had faith, but not knowledge—at least not the kind of knowledge Nicodemus had; that wasn't possible at that time. But we can say that each man knew God in his own way. Faith is rarely tangible and often indescribable—even those of us who cherish our faith find it hard to understand how we got it and even harder to articulate it, but we know that our relationship with God depends on it.

Faith is not just about what we think but also about what we feel and what we've experienced and the ways we respond. Stories of our ancestors in faith, like Abram, attest to that. Frederick Buechner says that "We believe in God—such as it is, we have faith—because certain things happened to us once and go on happening." Faith is about transformation, a change of self from the inside out, new birth or rebirth that may begin with one unexpected encounter with the holy, and continues as we respond, often in ways we don't even realize. For Abram, *going* where God told him to go led him on a journey of faith, a journey that blessed him so that he would be a blessing to the world. Paul reminds us in today's lesson from Romans that "the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith." It was faith that transformed Abram to Abraham. Perhaps that night time encounter with Jesus began the work of transformation for Nicodemus.

Now, back to that business from Soren Kierkegaard. Separating admirers and followers seems a bit judgmental, unless we use it to consider who we are as people of faith. Let's remember that just as each of us is unique, so is our faith and our relationship with God in Christ. Faith is a journey on an unmarked road. Even when we're not aware of it, it has a starting point, whether that is under the guidance of our families, or friends, or through an encounter with Jesus like the one Nicodemus had. Our journeys take us along roads with twists and turns, high places, low places, ruts and detours; at times we may even feel lost. Sometimes we are followers, and sometimes we may seem to be admirers. Yet the Lord is with always with us, keeping us safe and watching over our going out and our coming in. Knowing that is what faith is about. Let us pray.

Lord God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think that we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore we will trust you always, though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone." *Amen.*