

If you go to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, you can see a Monet painting called *Blue Water Lilies*. This is one of about 250 paintings of water lilies that Monet painted almost exclusively toward the end of his life. They are, all of them, beautiful. Some are stunning. But I find something especially compelling about the *Blue Water Lilies*.

If you stand directly in front of the painting and closer than two or three feet away from it, the shapes and colors make very little sense. The painting is about six feet square on stretched canvas, but it has no frame, giving it a feel of the infinite. There is no sky, no horizon, no details except in surface texture. What you see standing that close are powerfully sweeping brushstrokes, evidence of brilliant technique, even as you struggle with the apparent shapelessness.

There is another way to see *Blue Water Lilies* if you can release the need for detail, for structure and for certainty. You almost have to let the painting come into your peripheral vision from somewhere else in the room—to catch you off-guard. If you allow yourself to relax your perspective just enough, the painting can reward you with an experience of depth, reflection, movement and emotion. The life within the painting can take your breath away.

John's Gospel can have similar effects with stories about Jesus as a path to experiencing God, Christ and the Holy Spirit—the Triune God. If you want to learn about God, turn your focus to the life of Jesus and wait for the Spirit to catch you with your defenses down. Notice how Jesus in our Gospel confounds Nicodemus' search for up-close details about God so that the Spirit can catch him from another direction with a more intimate experience of God. Jesus invites Nicodemus into a sudden insight of a deeper reality without

working his way to the awareness, like one of my Zen teachers says: “Don’t *get* there, *be* there!”

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a scholar of Torah and a Jewish leader who has acknowledged Jesus as a legitimate teacher—a rabbi who has come from God. The signs that Jesus has performed—his words and actions—have proven to Nicodemus that Jesus is worthy of attention—that God is with him because “no one can do these signs...apart from the presence of God.”

Jesus responds to that recognition with a riddle: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus is caught off guard; he is off balance and tries to recover by responding rationally. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Now, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. There are those who think that Nicodemus came at night because he was afraid to be seen with this radical rabbi. Maybe. There are those who think that Nicodemus was not very bright. That seems less likely to me. I think he was just standing too close to the painting. That is to say that I think Nicodemus was simply in the habit of relying on his sensible, educated mind to seek structure and detail. I think this is a story about a little flash of experience into a deeper reality—an unexpected gift from the Holy Spirit of the presence of God made possible by Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Night, in scripture, can mean many things, but given the mystical nature of this passage, looking for meaning beyond the literal bears fruit. Night, in scripture, can be related to death, to sin or to uncertainty. But it is also considered the time of divine summons and heavenly dreams. Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner said: “Night is the time of silence and of gathered strength that restrains itself, that can wait and allow things to ripen.”

So what if this is a story about a man, Nicodemus, who came to Jesus in an unknowing state of readiness? Rahner went on to say, “We experience

the night as the beginning, as the undetermined, as that which has yet to be made clear and concrete: the night and the day. The beginning,” Rahner said, “the possibility, is what is ambiguous: the rich promise, which has not yet materialized, the wide open possibility, which has not yet been realized, the splendid plan, which has not been carried out. Such things are of necessity ambiguous. Promising and fragile and threatening is the preliminary, which may go forth into all kinds of directions, but of whose arrival one can never be certain.¹”

I think Jesus saw that Nicodemus was in just such a night of preliminary readiness. Nicodemus gave voice to his awe, his openness to the deeper reality in his profoundly appropriate response: “How can these things be?” What a perfect response to a deeper realization of the nature of God!

To be born into the relationship of the Trinity—to be born from “above,” from the realm of God—is to claim one’s inheritance as a child of God, to transcend one’s biological family. For first century Mediterraneans, that reassignment carried an important shift in social status. To share the family name meant that only the first-born child, Jesus, had a standing that differed from all the other children. Everyone else is an equal.

That relationship is what John’s Jesus is pointing Nicodemus toward. Jesus is not referring to some future event that meets political expectations, as in the future rule of a God-King on earth. Jesus is offering a membership to an on-going experience of new life—*right now*. The Son of God, after being lifted up in the crucifixion and resurrection, is granting access to family kinship to all those born of the Spirit.

Many of our Pentecostal, evangelical or non-denominational brothers and sisters refer to this passage as a sort of litmus test by which to judge whether a person is a true Christian or not. They tend to have a specific kind

¹ Rahner, Karl, and Annemarie S. Kidder. *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life: Sermons, Prayers, and Essays*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010.

of experience in mind: a “born-again” experience. While I do not deny my brothers and sisters in Christ their own faith experience, I think that there are still other ways to approach this notion of being born from above.

The sciences are clear that, with all the variety our species displays, our human nature is fundamentally social and relational. That is to say that without disregarding that which is marvelously personal and unique to each individual, humans are profoundly social beings. We seem to have been hard-wired for relationship, created to live, travel and learn with and from others. And we learn how and who to be in relationship from our families, in all the variations and configurations that make up human families.

To be born from above, to be called the children of God and to take on that family name is to transcend all our earthly groupings. Not abandon them, mind you, but to be drawn into something much larger; to move into a larger identity beyond the self into the Mystery that includes us but is greater than any one of us or our families of origin, greater even than all of us together. To be born in the Spirit is to live into that Mystery around whom the six-winged seraph lead us in singing “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts.”

To be made in the image and likeness of God is to be in relationship because God is in relationship. Beyond that, our efforts to describe God’s nature will always fall short of our experiences of God. Just like standing too close to Monet’s *Blue Water Lilies*, descriptions will never provide the fullest encounter available. Talking *about* God or merely about brushstrokes is different than being suddenly taken by a stunning beauty that breaks your heart open from across a room. “The wind blows where it chooses,” Jesus says to Nicodemus, “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.”

Words, descriptions, explanations of the Holy Trinity are not the fullest experience of the Mysterious relationship. Direct encounters baffle our attempts at logic such that nothing we say is sufficient, and yet we must say

something. And so we say, "God is many and *a/so* God is one." But we could just as easily say, "God is not one, God is not many." That is the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery that is present right here, right now.

The more we allow ourselves to be taken into the heart of that mystery, the more prepared we are to encounter God who is always and already closer to us than our own breathe. The more we trust ourselves to the God whose love is fuller, deeper and more encompassing than we can possibly imagine, the more we live into our birthright as children of God.

So take yourself as deeply into descriptions and explanations as you care to go. Brushstrokes are important. Just remember to relax your seeking from time to time so that experiences of God's already freely given grace can flood your understanding with love. Ponder, now and then, "How can these things be?"