

“Are you born again?” In high school, every Wednesday night for two years, a church youth-group minister asked me that question. I didn’t know what to say.

Ten years later, a co-worker who had recently joined a Four-Square church discovered that, as a Benedictine oblate, I prayed in my office every day. Unsatisfied with my faith, he would ask: “But are you born again? Have you made Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior?” By then, I had a fairly snarky answer, which I won’t share with you here.

Some 15 years after that, now running my own business, I was sitting in a potential client’s office. He was, much to my amazement, grilling me about my faith. When he learned that my two business partners were Buddhists, he gave me a patronizing smile and said: “John three, sixteen.”

“What about it?” I asked him. “Well,” he said, “I mean, at least *you* are born again, aren’t you? I’m sure you’ve have made Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior, right?” I’ll give you my answer a little later.

I’m sure you’ve had similar experiences. So you’ve also probably met people who ask versions of these questions with genuine, charitable openness. I sometimes find these conversations to be productive, even when neither of our perspectives really satisfies the other.

But then there are others who load their questions with condescension; their hearts and minds closed. Some of them try to shut down all further exploration by referring to John 3:16: “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.”

A colleague of mine, a Baptist pastor, tells people in these kinds of encounters: “Keep going. Keep looking. What comes next?” Not many people have memorized the next line: “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.”

I like Pastor Mindi’s challenge: “Keep going. Keep looking.” Because there is so much more. What Jesus says in John 3:16 is true. It’s just not the entire truth.

If we keep looking, we discover. For one thing, we learn that the phrase “for God so loved the world...” does not refer to *how much* God loves the world, but *in what manner*. God gave love in this way: by giving us Jesus Christ. But that’s not all. If we keep looking, Jesus clarifies *why* God gave us love in this way. God did not give us love through the life, death, resurrection and

ascension of Jesus Christ for the purpose of condemning anyone. God gave Jesus Christ to save us.

If we keep looking, we unfold. We open our hearts. If we take John 3:16 all by itself and out of context, we can distort the gift of grace. We twist God's gift into an obligation that people have to satisfy so that a vindictive God won't damn them to eternal hellfire. If our hearts and minds are clenched, we can warp *one verse* into a judgmental cleaver that splits humanity into who's in and who's out. But if we are open to hear it in the lines that follow, Jesus explains that God sent him to experience life with us and to save us.

If we keep going, we reframe. We experience these verses in context. Jesus is talking with a specific person: his friend Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who is asking endless questions. Nicodemus is unique to John's Gospel, and whether he actually existed or not, Nicodemus gives the Gospel writer a simple, but elegant, device to mark thresholds between life that is death and the death that is life.

Nicodemus appears three times in John's Gospel: first, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and a second time at Jesus' persecution when Nicodemus is suspected to be a follower of Jesus. Nicodemus' third and final act is to bring incense and oils to help prepare Jesus' body for burial. This morning, the Gospel writer uses Nicodemus to make a point about birth.

Our story takes place in Jerusalem, where Nicodemus is a member of the city's Jewish upper class. He is a Pharisee, specifically, as was St. Paul and quite probably Jesus as well. Even so, for a member of Jerusalem's elite to address a Galilean villager as a rabbi, a "teacher who has come from God," would have astonished John's first century audience. But that recognition is exactly what creates the opening for the dialogue that follows.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. Now, on one level, it makes sense that he might be concerned about his fellow religious authorities discovering him. On another level, the Gospel writer is up to something more compelling. John is converting the poetic Gospel prologue into a tangible story.

In other words, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in darkness to ask questions of the light that shines in the darkness. There in the uncomprehending dark, Nicodemus struggles to understand the idea of being "born from above." He is wrestling with more than the simple mechanics.

Birth, in the ancient world, determined a person's status for life. Those born to the peasant class stayed peasants. Those born to the elite class stayed elite. People experienced natural ups and downs, but only the most extraordinary events could substantially alter a person's social standing. To be

born over again, as unimaginable as this was even for the well-educated Nicodemus, would be an astounding status-shifting and life-altering event.

For comparison, the closest custom available was the rare occasion when a Roman elite adopted a slave. In those cases, the slave got a new family name and legal status, but they were not always treated as equals.

What's baffling Nicodemus is that Jesus is talking about God granting an entirely new level of honor and status to those born of the realm of God. For a person at any level of ancient Israelite society to be named a child of God would mean they had been recreated at the highest possible level of honor and status.

All children sharing the name of the Father share the Father's honor. All status differences between the children dissolve with the notable exception of the first-born. John's Jesus, the life that is the light of all people, is beginning a process of dispelling the darkness for his friend, Nicodemus. The Word made Flesh is giving to Nicodemus, who has consented and who trusts God's name, the power to become a child of God.

As Nicodemus chews on that revelation, John's Jesus elaborates on another essential element of the prologue. Whether "born again," "born anew" or "born from above," we are made children of God, not by human activity but by the Spirit, the very breath, the *wind* of God.

"The wind blows where it chooses," Jesus tells 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."

We are rebirthed, you see, from above *by God*, not by our own doing.

Televangelist Joel Osteen ends his broadcast with this: "Just say, 'Lord Jesus, I repent of my sins. Come into my heart. I make you my Lord and Savior.'" And then he says, "Friends, if you prayed that simple prayer, we believe you got born again."

Well, I don't. I don't believe that. I want Joel and the rest of us to keep going. Because beyond that simple prayer, there is blood and there is water. With deference to those women who have experienced giving birth, I have at least participated in the birth of several humans and more than a few animal babies. I've seen enough to open my awareness to the organically messy and often painful drama of bringing new life into the world.

As a result, my answer to those who ask: "Have you made Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? Are you born again?" is "No."

I have not made Jesus Christ my Lord and Savior. God did that. Beyond giving my heart to God's grace and trying to listen, I've made nothing happen.

And, no, I am not born again. Not yet. Or maybe not all the way, I don't know. I'm inclined to think that God is still in the process of rebirthing me.

Maybe that's because, like Nicodemus, the grace of God still stuns me. I still ask, "How are these things possible?" Even so, the more I come out of the darkness of my own certainty, my own ignorance or fear, the more aware I become of God's loving light shining in my own life and in the lives of those around me.

With all due respect to Joel Osteen, my alternative suggestion is just this: Keep going. The Spirit of God goes where she chooses, stirring different people in different ways. Keep looking. The breath of God appears to specific people in unique ways. Keep asking. Mutual dialogue, casual conversation, even argument with God, nurture the intimate relationship that God wants with every one God's children.

So it is with everyone who is *being born* of the Spirit.

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