

In the season of Lent we are taking the stories of Jesus to heart, and while I may not have memorized this one like Connor, by walking around inside this story for the last two weeks – I’ve come to see that in many ways I am as foolish as Nicodemus, and this story has been born again to my understanding.

This is a challenging scripture passage for many, not just because of the mysterious things Jesus says, but because the language of being “born again” and John 3:16 in particular (staple of highway road signs and football games) have become shorthand for a certain kind of religious fervor.

And so, for many years now, I’ve put a box [draw box] around this text, to keep a safe distance, and thought – this one’s just not for me.

But, I am a bit curious. [look inside]

Nicodemus was curious too. A Pharisee, a religious authority, member of the Sanhedrin, the high council. His fellow Pharisees knew about Jesus and were trying to find ways to discredit him and reduce his growing influence, which they felt was a threat to their own power.

But Nicodemus was starting to get curious. There was something about Jesus that made him ask the big questions.

He sneaks out in the dead of night and goes to find Jesus. He has to be careful, he can’t let his Pharisee friends know what he’s up to. He is curious enough that he approaches Jesus directly, however, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he goes in the middle of the night, when he can keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. Nicodemus is not yet ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to let it change his life.

Nicodemus approaches Jesus with what he “knows” about Jesus as “rabbi” and about the “signs” that Jesus has performed. Because Nicodemus is a learned scholar, he’s all about having a clear answer, particularly when it comes to religion. There is holiness and there is sacrilege, and the law clearly defines what behaviors and experiences make for a righteous life.

He comes to Jesus with a statement that is in fact a question. Jesus, you’re doing these amazing things, but you’re also doing and saying some things that challenge what I’ve long come to accept as true. Help me put two and two together here. How does this make sense?

And Jesus, as usual, doesn’t give a straight answer. Jesus starts talking about being “born from above” or “born again” (the word actually means the same thing in Greek).

And Nicodemus has no idea what Jesus is saying. He's flummoxed, mired in what that would mean literally, to physically be born again. And socially -- because for him, to be born again would mean a very radical change to his status and honor.

But Jesus starts to explain what it means to be spiritually reborn, to have something new happen inside of you. Now, I've known a fair number of people who have shared with me their story of being "born again". Amazing stories where they can tell you the exact moment when their lives changed and they quote "accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior". That always confused me, because I never had one big moment like that. Instead, I had a lot of little moments. I had times when things made a little more sense, and I felt God's love more fully, but the curiosity and questions never ended. Those questions got me into conversations, into books, and even into church. Slowly curiosity has opened the way for me to come to know God more fully.

I think that's how it is for many of us, especially if we are the kind of people who are cautious but curious. Our particular religious tradition teaches us that it's not only okay to ask big questions, but it's actually a good thing. We don't believe in leaving our brains at the church door. Asking questions is a sign of deep faith. We get curious, and when we do we sometimes have these encounters with God's love and grace. We wrestle. We grapple. We try to work out who we think Jesus is, and what that means for our lives. And that work doesn't always go quickly, or end neatly.

In his own surprising way, in that Jesus way that always raises more questions than answers, Jesus tells Nicodemus -- There are many things you're not going to understand -- still, be curious. But stay humble. If you choose to live into God's will for your life, if you let God take the wheel, you won't know where you're headed, and you may not always understand where you've been, but that's ok.

Nicodemus -- if you're so focused on the symbols, the tangibles, the visible, the graspable -- you'll never experience the full embodiment of God -- the kingdom is here and now. We must be about living it. It's not about deciding what to believe -- whether you have enough evidence -- it's about living as if the kingdom is already come, in your own actions and the cultivation of love, relationship, creation.

And Nicodemus doesn't know this at the time, but Nicodemus himself is in the midst of this second birth. He is having a sort of birth pangs brought about by a curiosity that he cannot ignore any longer. He is being changed. The last time we see Nicodemus in the Gospels is when he helps bury Jesus. Nicodemus is there at the end for Jesus, even when Christ's own disciples had fled in fear. I think there's something meaningful about that. In mourning Jesus death, Nicodemus was showing that he had been reborn. And when Jesus rose again, that new life took on new meaning.

Martin Luther King once used the story of Nicodemus to talk about being born again. He said that Jesus hadn't given Nicodemus easy instructions or said "stop doing this" or "stop doing that". Instead, Dr. King said, Jesus told Nicodemus "your whole structure must be changed". This was nothing less than a total shake-up.

Dr. King was talking specifically about how America had to be "born again" and deal with injustice. And that's a good example of how we as people, and as institutions and communities, must also sometimes be born again, and do what is right and what is good, for the love of God and for the love of the world.

And I think about us, about our call to be followers of Christ, and about our call to transform not just our own lives but also our communities, our country, and our world. I like the idea that we are continuously and gradually being born again. We are living lives of change, in a world full of change, and that means we are constantly having to go back to Jesus and ask the questions that keep us up at night. And we have to keep being born again, maybe not just once, but over and over and over again in many ways.

In what ways are you being reborn in this season? Maybe you're a bit stuck, trying – like Nicodemus – to ignore the signs that something needs to change in your world. Or maybe you are praying desperately for new life, for transformation, taking tentative steps towards sobriety, or building community, or trusting in God a bit more. Perhaps you are in the throes of labor, finishing a dissertation, moving through a time of grief, owning up to past mistakes, working to make your dreams a reality. What will your Nicodemus moment be? What big questions or possibilities are keeping you up at night? How might Jesus be calling you to live your faith in the light of day? And how un-settled are you willing to be if it means that you might just be reborn, and the world might just be better for it? Amen?