

Is It Too Late to Start Over?

John 3:1-10

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

March 20, 2011, Lent 2

Is it too late to start over? That's one of the basic questions in the Nicodemus story—whether a religious leader set in his ways can start over so that he can see what God is doing. Nowadays it's a question asked by people who are being forced to retool to find new jobs: after working in a factory most of my life, is it too late to start over? Or people ask the question in what we call midlife crisis: now that my life has become stale, now that I can see that my life isn't going to last forever and it's not going to mean very much, is it too late to start over? It was interesting to Google that question. I noticed one post that asked "Is it too late to start over at 42?" Then one that asked "Is it too late to start over at 29?" Then another that asked "Is it too late to start over at 19?"

Well, is it? That answer, of course, is that it's never too late. But that's only half the answer. The other half is that starting over doesn't simply depend on you. It's not a switch that you can throw or a button you can push to reboot your life. It really depends on God. Only the Spirit can give you a new start.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Not all Pharisees are bad guys. This one was a seeker. He was a leader of the religious establishment, so in that culture he must have been pretty well along in years. He had heard about Jesus and his miracles and he was curious. There's no sense here that the Pharisees are laying a trap for Jesus. Nicodemus comes to him at night—maybe because he doesn't want to be seen with Jesus, but probably because John is telling us symbolically that Nicodemus is still "in the dark," outside the realm of eternal life and light.

This conversation is one rabbi to another. Nicodemus says, "Rabbi, I know you come from God"—although he has no idea just how true that is—"and I know you have the presence of God with you." I don't think this is just flattery. I think it's more like "You seem to have something I don't have. I hang around rabbis all the time. I talk religion for a living. But you have something more than tradition and book-learning."

No doubt he's getting ready to ask a question, but Jesus doesn't let him get it out. "I know what you want. You want to be part of the kingdom of God. You see God working through my ministry and you want to know how to join God's reign and God's mission. I'll let you in on the secret: No one can see what God is doing without being born"—and here he uses a Greek word that can be translated "again" or "from above." I don't think there's a huge difference; the point is that you have to start over and be reborn spiritually. It is a birth that comes from God.

Some people assume that Nicodemus is kind of a dummy and thinks Jesus is being completely literal. "What do you mean? How can anyone be born again when he's old? Can I crawl back into my mother's womb and be born again?" It's possible that John is using that kind of misunderstanding as a literary device, but I think Nicodemus the rabbi is just using the same metaphor to ask his question. "How can I start over at this point in my life? Look at me: I'm an old man! I've been shaped by my family and my community and my life experiences. I have convictions. I have opinions. I have a way of doing religion that has been serviceable for me. I know there's something more—I see it in you—but what am I supposed to do, somehow magically go back to the beginning of life and start over as a new person?"

Some people freak out when they hear about being born again. Lots of sermons today in mainline Protestant churches will explain why all the evangelicals are wrong in translating this verse

“born again” and thinking that some kind of conversion experience is necessary. Growing up Southern Baptist, I found the use of the phrase “born again” perfectly normal. We all knew what it meant: that you had reached a crisis—whether at age 7 or age 70—where you realized that you needed to be forgiven by God and you needed Jesus in your life. When Jimmy Carter, also raised Southern Baptist, ran for President in 1976, all of a sudden being “born again” was a news item, some kind of regional curiosity, and Jimmy was a freak from another culture—as if we’d never had a President who was a Christian before. After that people began to ask me, “Are you one of those born-again?”

Yeah, I am. I don’t mean that I had some dramatic experience before I was baptized at age 7 or that I was once a drug addict and got clean. I just mean that the spiritual life that I have inside me is not something I constructed for myself; it was given to me. It is continually given to me. Something outside myself—from above—came into me and God’s Spirit put eternal life in me. That happened when I realized—and it’s more a recognition than a decision—that God loved me so much that he sent Jesus to die for me so that I could have the eternal life that comes only as a gift from God. I believe that it was the Spirit that somehow touched me on the inside and woke me up to that reality and that awakening—to use a different metaphor—was how I received this new life or new birth.

When Harvard psychologist William James wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience* more than a century ago, he distinguished between the once-born and the twice-born. Some people seem to have the experience of being born into a religious tradition and grow up into it; others become religious by way of a radical change in their lives. But even James acknowledged that they often wind up at the same place in terms of their lives and values. I don’t think Jesus means to say that you can’t have eternal life without a radical conversion experience. He is saying that eternal life is a gift that comes from outside ourselves, whether through a gradual transformation that almost feels like growing into the self you were meant to be, or through an abrupt change in your life.

When Nicodemus asks “How can I possibly start over?” Jesus replies, “Let me say it again: No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born physically and spiritually. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit.” A Jewish leader like Nicodemus might well think that being born a member of God’s people was the same thing as being born into the kingdom of God. Ethnicity was identity for him. The fact that he was a descendant of Abraham meant that he was heir to God’s promises, part of which he understood to mean that he would share in life in the messianic kingdom. Now Jesus was saying No, the kingdom of God—what John usually calls eternal life—is a matter of spirit and not flesh. It requires transformation, a spiritual birth and not just birth into a nation.

John had made the same point in chapter 1 of his gospel, what we usually call the prologue. These words might be familiar from Christmas Eve: “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” That’s what Jesus is talking about here: being born of God, born of the Spirit.

The apostle Paul’s testimony in Philippians 3 tells of an experience like that, even though he does not use the metaphor of rebirth. He says that he had every reason to place his confidence in the flesh, in his human effort to be religious. He was a Pharisee like Nicodemus. He was a real Jew, circumcised and perfectly obedient to the Law. But when he encountered Jesus as a living person, his whole life was reoriented. What he once considered so valuable, all his religious attainments, he now laid aside as if it was trash so that he could get his hands on what was so much more valuable: the knowledge of Jesus the Messiah as his Lord. This is what would have to happen to Nicodemus if he were ever to take part in God’s kingdom.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Don’t be astonished that I said to you ‘You must be born again.’” I guess Nicodemus *was* shocked. Maybe he thought there was one more step he could take in his spiritual

training. Maybe he thought Jesus had some secret knowledge to impart to him. But there wasn't a darned thing Nicodemus could do to see the kingdom of God. He had to be born.

Think about being born. What can you do to get yourself born? What does the baby inside a mother do to help in the process? Nothing. Babies don't come out doing a breaststroke. They don't even seem to know which direction is up. A baby is completely passive in the process of getting born until after he's already *been* born. That's the way it is with you, Nicodemus. It's a God thing.

It was night. No doubt there were evening breezes in the palm trees. The Spirit, Nicodemus, is like the wind. (Spirit and wind are the same word in Greek and Hebrew.) The wind is free. It blows where it chooses. You can't turn it on or turn it off, as we well know on Block Island. If you didn't know what wind was, you might think that all the trees are dancing tonight. It's invisible and mysterious. You can't tell me where the wind comes from or where it's going. God's Spirit is like that. That's the way it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit, who is wind-born.

Is it too late to start over? No. Can you restart yourself? No. God's Spirit has to come to you, as God's Spirit moved on the waters of the deep before the world was formed, as God breathed spirit into the first human, as the Spirit came on the prophets and they knew what God was saying, as the Spirit was upon Jesus and he proclaimed good news to the poor. Nicodemus, the spirit part of you has to be brought to life by God's Spirit, and I can't tell you exactly how or when that will happen.

Nicodemus says to Jesus, "How can these things be?" It's the question of Mary and Sarah and women who have been told they will have children when they are too young or too old. How is this possible that new life will come to me? It is as if Nicodemus is asking "How it is possible for me as a died-in-the-wool religious man to become spiritually pregnant at this point in my life?" How can it be that sharing God's life and God's kingdom is not about following the rules after all? I've dedicated my life to rules and religion, and now the one who seems to know God personally tells me that God is wild and free and transforming and experienced directly.

Jesus says to him, "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you don't understand these things?" If you don't understand about spiritual realities are you really qualified to be a teacher? But I think he is asking that to all of us—and not just Jews—who think we have God figured out, who have God down to a system, or reduced God to a set of ethical principles rather than a life-giving person who seeks to transform us and make us alive when we are naturally dead to him. Are you a church member and yet you don't understand these things?

I think that this is probably where the conversation with Nicodemus ends, with verse 10. Beginning with verse 11 we have either another speech by Jesus to a broader audience (the "you" is now plural) or an explanation by John himself. I am going to stop here too, and take up the story of the serpent in the wilderness and John 3:16 next Sunday. But I should tell you first that this is not the last we see of Nicodemus in John's gospel. He turns up again in chapter 7 at a meeting of the Pharisees, giving a kind of half-hearted defense of Jesus. But he turns up the last time in chapter 20, after Jesus has died. Who is it that goes to anoint Jesus' body along with the rich man Joseph of Arimathea, who is called a secret disciple? It is Nicodemus.

I think that John wants to tell us that it was not too late for this religious leader. No, he did not have a sudden awakening like the Samaritan woman in the next chapter. But the Spirit has his own timing. And perhaps it is harder for the religious to be converted than the hard-living sinner. But even for a set-in-his-ways Pharisee who has trusted in the predictability of rules and seasons and books, it is not too late. The wind is still blowing. There is a new life waiting to be born.