
How Can These Things Be?

An Evensong Meditation by Clayton Harrington
Lent 2 – Year A

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever gone to someone, to ask a few questions or to clarify a few things, only to leave more confused than when you arrived? For me, I had this experience when I was first starting college. For our first semester, our schedules were created based on our major and the basic core requirements. I was a commuting student, which meant that the 8 a.m. classes every day combined with several three hour gaps until finishing around 5 p.m., meant that I would be wasting large parts of my day. So, I did what was recommended and went to my advisor to find out how to fix my schedule. I sat down with him for about fifteen minutes and by the time I was done, I was sure that the drop/add class system of my undergrad was developed as a test of the intellect of the students. I walked out of that meeting with more questions than I went in with. I think Nicodemus could relate to that.

The Gospel of John describes Nicodemus as a devout Pharisee and leader of the religious community. He comes by night, under the cover of darkness, to speak with Jesus, as many of the ruling Jewish leaders and Pharisees are already opposed to him. Nicodemus gets a private audience with Jesus and apparently wants him to expound upon his teachings. Jesus answers with something completely unexpected, saying, “No one can see the kingdom of God without having been born from above.”

Nicodemus is puzzled. He hadn’t mentioned anything about wanting to see the kingdom of God and what’s this whole business about being born from above? His protests only lead Jesus to go on to say that those who want to enter the kingdom of God must be born of water and Spirit.

But this statement only further confuses Nicodemus. Nicodemus wants Jesus to give him instructions that will open his mind and tell him the things that he ought to be doing as a religious person. He wants spiritual insights and ethical rules. And while Jesus often offers moral teaching and religious reform, that’s rarely where he starts. He bids, “Come, follow me,” before he provides the complete rules for the journey. What Nicodemus wants is a three-point sermon. What Jesus is offering is transformation based on total dependence and belief in God.

In today’s Epistle, Paul writes that “Abraham *believed* God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” We are often tempted to understand “belief” in statements like this as simple acknowledgment of something’s existence. The way that we believe in gravity or electricity. But that’s not what’s meant in these passages. Instead, “belief” means trust. The way that I believe in a chair to hold me up when I sit down on it. The way that I believe in my closest friends to be there for me in times of trouble.

For Paul, trust is what makes righteousness, or right relationship with God, possible. And Trust is also the key to the famous John 3:16 from today’s Gospel. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” Many have often understood “believe” in this verse to mean believing in the existence of Jesus or believing the right things about Jesus, but what Jesus is asking of Nicodemus, and all of us, is to trust him.

But, we are often like Nicodemus. “How can these things be?” we ask alongside him. “Jesus, we just came here to ask for a few more words of wisdom that you always seem prepared to give us. Tell us those sayings that make us feel comfortable and content. Speak those parables that we think we have fully figured out and no longer challenge us...”

But what’s all this about needing to be born from above? Jesus, that sounds like you want us to change?...And us needing to trust you?...Well, Jesus that’s just a little risky...”

So often, we try to turn our walk with Christ into a set of ideals, rules, and teachings, instead of being primarily a relationship built on trust in God. Ideals and teachings are easy. Trusting is much harder. To be born from above means that we will have to open ourselves to the very real necessity of change. To believe God, to trust God, means that we must give up the sense of total control in our lives.

This Lent, we are asked to turn inward, to examine ourselves as we make our way to the cross. We are called to prepare ourselves for the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. We are invited to open ourselves up to what the Spirit is doing and to trust more deeply our relationship with God – so, that as Easter comes, we may sing the words of that old hymn:

“Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, Just to take Him at His word; Just to rest upon his promise, Just to know, ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ Jesus, Jesus, how I trust him! How I’ve proved Him o’er and o’er! Jesus, Jesus, Precious Jesus! O for grace to trust Him more!” [\[1\]](#) Amen.

[\[1\]](#) Louisa M. R. Stead, “Tis so Sweet to Trust in Jesus,” 1882.