

*People, Get Ready...for Change*

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Lent 2, 2020 John 3: 1-17

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, 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." <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup> "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> "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. <sup>17</sup> "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."

Before you close your hymnal, keep it there at #388.

The lyric of this hymn: ***O Come and Dwell in Me***

is by Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley  
and one of the founders of the Methodist movement,

Look at the top left of that page.

This whole section of the hymnal,  
and every Methodist hymnal,  
has a section devoted to "Rebirth and the New Creature"  
for the Wesley's were convinced  
from their own experience  
that that is what we are all longing for  
that is what is required of us.  
so that we might be disciples;  
made perfect in love.

This is a story about that change.

It is one of the great stories in scripture  
that begin in darkness. They are always holy encounters.  
the creation story, as God hovers over the waters  
the encounter of Jacob and the angel in the  
night wrestling at the river,  
the women will go in darkness to the tomb of Jesus  
and there meet the risen Lord.

and here Nicodemus, a Pharisee  
a member of the Sanhedrin,  
the religious council that made judgments  
over any issues that came before them

Nicodemus, the Pharisee, came in the cover of night.  
seeking the light of the teacher sent by God.

Jesus was in Jerusalem for Passover  
he had driven the moneychangers out of the temple,  
and performed signs, likely healings,  
and Nicodemus says to him,  
*no one can do these things if not given power by God.*

Then Jesus answers:

Yes, affirming his awareness  
*and only those who are born from above will see  
what I do as a sign of  
the presence of the Kingdom of God.*

*What does that mean, asks Nicodemus  
...to be born from above?*

Jesus is a little surprised  
that Nicodemus, a religious man,  
would not understand spiritual rebirth  
But then, we are religious people and its a great mystery to *us*.  
To be born of water, Jesus seems to be telling him,  
is to make a conscious choice to join ourselves  
to God in baptism.

to be born of the Spirit  
is to give way to the work of that spirit,  
which infuses the Christ  
and all creation.

*...Spirit of the living god fall afresh on me,  
melt me, mold me, fill me, use me....*

If we allow ourselves to be remade by that living water,  
A name Jesus will give himself in this gospel.  
If we allow ourselves to be infused with the spirit.  
Then somehow, in ways we cannot comprehend  
we stake our claim in the kingdom of God.  
and begin our everlasting life.

If we go on to verse 18 to 21.

when Jesus uses the word with the root of "pistis"  
translated as "faith" (also as believe"  
it is never a noun, it is always a verb:  
a state of being convinced and  
living in that truth.

It is to choose to leave the darkness  
and come into the light.

To have faith is to be faithful, to act, full of faith,

*Those who live in darkness hate the light, says Jesus,  
because their evil deeds will be exposed*

*To be born from above is to do what is true  
to follow the one who is the way, the truth and the life.*

But Nicodemus struggles:

The change Jesus asks, this rebirth  
will alienate everyone he knows  
He will, I imagine, lose his reputation, his livelihood,  
his friends, maybe his family.  
and so he makes his way home in the darkness

He will for the next year or so, follow Jesus from afar.

When Jesus comes before the Sanhedrin

To be judged, in John 7:50-52,

*“Nicodemus, who had gone to him before,  
and who was one of them, said to them,*

*‘Does our Torah judge a man without first giving him a hearing and  
learning what he does?’*

*They replied, ‘Are you from Galilee too?’”*

questioning his loyalty to the Sanhedrin.

Then, after the crucifixion, Nicodemus will go to the tomb with  
Joseph of Aramathia, another secret disciple, also frightened of the  
religious authorities, as they bring  
Jesus body to the tomb and anoint his body.

A bold and quiet act of faithfulness.

Some 2000 years later.

we appreciate the challenge of the  
being born from above, and the changes required  
in the spiritual rebirth.

It is so much easier to pledge our allegiance to the culture  
not to upset those in power  
whether church or state or other systems,  
not to be seen as overly pious  
or too Christian.

It wouldn't be cool:  
Anger is cooler, revenge is cooler,  
hate is cooler than love.

In the book of Revelation,  
John of Patmos warns the churches  
not to be as those who  
believe privately but publicly worship Roman Gods.

In France, 1600 years later, John Calvin  
The great leader of reformation there,  
Spoke of those supported the reform of a corrupt church  
But would not speak out.

in Germany in the 1930's most Christians there  
were appalled by the new regime.  
but publicly supported it, afraid of the cost.

Some German pastors came up with a declaration:  
*Jesus Christ is Gods assurance  
of the forgiveness of all our sins,  
so in the same way and with the same seriousness  
he is also God's mighty claim **upon our whole life.***  
*The Barman Declaration , 1934*

Rebirth is not something we do,  
**its really God's labor in us**

to which we can deny or consent.  
We are offered choices, moment by moment  
To make small, deliberate decisions  
    This way or this way  
And some will be more in keeping with  
    God's leading than others,  
        But we keep being invited to make  
            Those decisions  
            Invited into change

You don't do this alone, none of us can do this alone,  
we have a community that bears it with us  
and we have Jesus,  
    the pioneer and perfecter of our faith  
        who shows us what faithfulness looks like.

We can feel discouraged  
lose hope that we or the world will ever change  
    *As Henry Emerson Fosdick said:*  
    *"Truth forever on the scaffold,*  
    *wrong forever on the throne."*

But, the call from Jesus is to get ourselves ready  
whatever is happening in the world, or in our lives  
and to be ready to be changed  
    little by little, day by day.

"People Get Ready" is our theme song for Lent.  
It speaks to the redemption that comes with being  
    born from above;  
to get on board, leaving behind  
    anything that divides us,  
        messes with our minds.  
*People get ready, there's a train a comin'*  
*don't need no baggage. you just get onboard,*  
*all you need is faith to hear the diesel's humming.*

*Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.*

Curtis Mayfield wrote it in 1965  
after the March on Washington,  
after the bombing that killed 4 girls  
heading Sunday School  
in a Baptist church in Birmingham Alabama.

In this song, he works out his grief, his rage against injustice  
He called on the people to rise above it,  
to be on the train that God was bringing through  
and not to be stuck in revenge.

This is your train to glory, he said. Don't worry about those who did this  
horrible deed: pity them for they are lost.

He wrote:

*There is no room for the hopeless sinner  
who hurt mankind just to save their own.  
Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner  
There's no hiding place against the kingdom's throne.*

There are choices to be made  
you can choose to get onboard  
rise above and be part of something better.

Perhaps all of this is to get us ready for the next stage  
Of our transformation, our rebirth in God's kingdom  
Some in this congregation, some in our families, maybe we  
Ourselves feel that we are getting to board that last train,  
The one heading to a land we do not know.  
to a state of being we cannot fathom.

Mayfield himself was paralyzed from an accident on stage  
in 1990, but he kept writing and performing for 9 years  
until his death, at age 57.

But he put out a call to faithfulness  
as Jesus puts out the call.

*Change is possible. It begins with you.  
it begins with me,  
and it ends in forever.*

Just get on board.

Amen.