

**What We Know We Say**  
**John 3:1–21**  
**Fort Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**Clemson, SC**  
**March 16, 2014**

“Are you born again?” I remember being asked that question in high school and telling the person who asked me that, “I know God loves me.” A few years later when I was in college someone else asked me, “When were you saved?” I replied that, “I was saved when Christ died on the cross for me and rose from the grave.” I think the person was looking for a date during my lifetime so I then replied, “Every day.”

Now I was not trying to be unreasonable, but I felt these questions were being asked in a technical sense and I understood them from a different perspective. I felt they were being asked to test the authenticity of my belief, but I had been raised in the faith to believe that God does the saving work in Jesus Christ and that the Holy Spirit helps me to understand and receive that gift of salvation. I had nothing to do with the saving. I simply received the gift of grace.

Our text today is the root of where such questions arise. Jesus and Nicodemus are both rabbis—teachers. Most scholars paint a picture of Nicodemus coming to Jesus out of curiosity, yet Nicodemus addresses Jesus in the plural we—“**we know that you are a teacher who comes from God.**”<sup>1</sup> In some ways you and I might think he is a messenger from the Pharisees sent to test Jesus, but maybe Nicodemus is coming of his own accord and seeking to learn more about Jesus and his teachings. Either way, Jesus gives Nicodemus and other Pharisees, including us, a lesson about profession of faith.

It was a clandestine meeting of minds where Jesus might have been like the visiting professor who wrote the book on the subject that this very learned

local professor had taught for years. So the local fellow comes by night after the crowd goes home and has his own time for learning. He speaks for the humanities department in saying, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from somewhere; for no one can do these write these signs that you do apart from having a gift from God.” Nicodemus is a teacher too, and he is ready to learn, but he approaches Jesus from a literal point of view—everything is plain and simple with him. It is as it reads, no more, no less. But with Jesus there is always more. Like a good Jewish rabbi he uses the language to broaden the meaning of what he is saying. He prophesies, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”<sup>2</sup> Nicodemus hears the word “another” that has multiple meanings, but he only thinks one meaning applies to birthing—again. How can it be that an old man can be born again?

As we dig into this text I want to share with you that rabbis would use a fourfold method of interpretation called PaRDeS.<sup>3</sup> Jewish scholars agree that Jesus was a master of PaRDeS as a teaching tool.<sup>4</sup> First, as good rabbis do, Jesus teaches by using words with double meanings. “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” The word meaning “from above” also means “again” or “anew.” Nicodemus begins interpreting what Jesus says using the first rabbinical method Pshat or the literal, simple sense of being born again as in coming from the womb a second time.

Perhaps I could describe it like this: two rabbis left a womb and were talking about being born. One said he was born from above and the other believed he was too. The “he” used here could refer to either Jesus, the one who said he was born from above or Nicodemus, the one who believed Jesus was born from above or the one who believed he too was born from above. Jesus encourages Nicodemus to move beyond the literal single meaning and listen to this word with all its fullness of meaning. For to be born from above/

again/afew would mean that one believes in Jesus and understands himself or herself to also be God's child.

What Jesus is saying is more like the second interpretive tool Remez which is an allegory or parable. So Jesus dispels the misconception of being physically born a second time and describes this being born from above "with water and Spirit." The word for spirit and wind are the same word in Greek and so neither the Spirit nor the wind will be controlled by humanity for the Spirit is free to move where it will just as the wind does. This is a mystery, but Nicodemus is still stuck in his literal mind asking how this can be. He is thinking of the birth waters and Jesus is describing the blessing of baptism for those who are born in the one who comes from above.

Now I hope that we cannot hear this passage without thinking about the water of baptism being the seal that marks us as Christ's own. For us, baptism is the sacrament where we profess our faith in Jesus Christ publicly as one body. That's what we did when we said the Apostles Creed today and every time. We believe in God's love for us all and that parents are free to speak the faith for their children to acknowledge God's grace before the child can even speak it. The Spirit gives us new life in baptism and we are promised that just as we die with Jesus we will also rise with Jesus. Being born in Jesus' love we are washed in the Spirit.

Further into the story Jesus turns the table onto Nicodemus and challenges his abilities as a teacher of Israel. Jesus now uses the plural "we" as he says "we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony."<sup>5</sup> Jesus is speaking of himself and his true disciples who are witnessing to the truth of his identity. Throughout the gospel of John the concern for seeing in order to believe is paramount, but here

Jesus confronts Nicodemus with being unable to testify to speak to what he does see.

Just as the third form of interpretation, Derasha goes deeper into relationship with one's teacher "to seek or search for meaning," so does Jesus push Nicodemus deeper as a Pharisee. Jesus reminds him saying, "Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up."<sup>6</sup> This is the "above" that Jesus is speaking of. Just as those who were bitten by a snake in the wilderness were instructed by Moses to look into the eyes of the serpent lifted up on the pole for healing, in the same way Jesus is urging Nicodemus to look into his teacher's eyes, of the Son of Man who comes from above and will be lifted up above, for those who look to him will be saved.

The fourth Gospel presents Jesus on the cross as exalted, high and lifted up. Most people would rather have the baby Jesus who sleeps most of the time and does not look into our eyes. But this Jesus, is visible where we cannot miss him, up, clearly there bearing forth the gory sins of our private lives. This Jesus invites us to look upon him for there is no greater love than this. This is the "so much" of John 3:16. God loved the world in this way.

The final movement of interpretation is Sod which deals with the "inner and mystical" understanding. We can call it a transforming Word within us as Jesus moves into our lives and we internalize being his disciples. Nicodemus has become speechless in our story and so we wonder if he is hearing Rabbi Jesus in a new way. Jesus reveals that the purpose of the Son is not to condemn, but to save. Jesus speaks of coming to the light as evidence of those who believe. Nicodemus has come to Jesus at night, but Jesus says, "and the people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

Two more stories help us with the inner and mystical understanding. When you are in a dark place and turn on a light, would you rather be a moth or

a roach? The moth flies toward the light, but the roach runs from it. Consider who loves the darkness and whether you want to be a moth or a roach.<sup>7</sup>

Better yet, consider what public proclamation of faith means. Our own history reveals how African American slaves who were forbidden to worship in the daylight gathered together at night and worshipped in spite of their masters' orders. Rarely were they allowed access to a Bible, yet they moved beyond Nicodemus' lesson in the dark and responded to the invitation to discipleship to stand in the light of worship even in the midst of darkness and testify to the true Light of Jesus Christ. They put their own lives at stake by breaking the rules in order to worship Jesus.<sup>8</sup> They were baptized by water and the Spirit and fleshed it out with their lives. They knew what they believed and they said what they knew. Let us all find ways to repel the darkness in our lives and **"come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that our deeds have been done in God."**<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:2.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:3.

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardes\\_\(Jewish\\_exegesis\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardes_(Jewish_exegesis)) accessed March 15, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.breadoflifebiblestudy.com/Lessons/02WordOfGod/Articles/4LevelsOfMeaning01.pdf> accessed March 14, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> John 3:11.

<sup>6</sup> John 3:14. See also Numbers 21:4-9.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, Lamar, Jr. Preaching the Gospel of John : Proclaiming the Living Word, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 38.

<sup>8</sup> O'Day, Gail, John in The New Interpreter's Bible~A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol, IX, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 555.

<sup>9</sup> John 3:21.