

Trinity Sunday

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Chaplaincy of St. George

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Born Again

Where in the Bible does it say that eternal life can be achieved through diet? The answer is Genesis 3.22, where God evicts Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, “*Lest they eat from the Tree of Life, and live forever.*” You’d never know it, but I was raised in a family where this was regarded as the height of wit, right up there with the one about the Sadducees: Why were they called the Sadducees? Because they didn’t believe in the resurrection; that’s why they were sad, you see. Of course, we knew what someone *really* has to do to receive eternal life, to be saved: you have to be born again. What really is kind of funny in retrospect was how obvious *that* seemed. Not everyone was, or even wanted to be, born again, but we took it for granted that we, and most everyone else, knew what it was. Those handmade highway signs of my boyhood: *You--or Ye--must be born again!* (long since replaced by anti-abortion messages) were put up by well-intentioned Christians who assumed passersby needed an admonition, but not an explanation. Now it’s a long way from obvious. Maybe we can feel akin to Nicodemus, who in today’s text from the Gospel of John seems clueless when it comes to making sense of Jesus’ talk about being born again.

Here’s the chronology according to John’s gospel: In the first chapter, Jesus calls his disciples. In the second, he makes wine at the wedding at Cana, and heads to Jerusalem

for Passover, where he makes a whip and cleanses the Temple. When “the Jews,” that is, the Judean religious authorities, see this, they ask, “*What sign can you show us that you should act like this?*” Jesus responds, “*Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up!*” John lets us know that Jesus is referring not literally to the Temple from which he has just ejected the animal sellers and moneychangers, but to his body and coming death and resurrection. Reasonably enough, the religious leaders take him literally, and miss the point. The chapter ends with John reporting that many of the people in Jerusalem for Passover are believing in Jesus because of the signs. Jesus’ acts might not have been good enough for the religious establishment, but they were good enough for the people in the street.

So it’s not surprising when the next chapter, John three, begins with one of the religious leaders seeking out Jesus on the sly, to find out what he’s about. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, so maybe he finds Jesus’ popular challenge to the authority of the Jerusalem Temple not totally unwelcome. Maybe this strange, and possibly dangerous, Galilean can be co-opted. If not, maybe he can be compromised. He begins by making nice: “*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.*” Jesus meets this irenic opening with an apparent non-sequitur: “*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*” The Greek adverb, ἀνωθεν, means *from above, from a higher place, from the beginning, from the first*, or simply, *again*. I’m thinking something like our “from the top,” as in “*Let’s try that last hymn again, from the top!*” Given that, and

given the theological context, Jesus says something relatively straightforward: “*No one can see the kingdom of God without receiving a new life that comes from God.*”

Why does John portray Nicodemus so drastically misconstruing what Jesus says? As Jesus soon points out, this is something any self-respecting teacher of Israel would have understood. That Israel can live and be saved only if the Spirit of Yahweh brings that which is dead to life is an ongoing theme in the Hebrew Scriptures—think of the dry bones in Ezekiel. Yet Nicodemus takes Jesus’ words in the most simple-minded, literal way imaginable. Earlier, when Jesus spoke of the destruction of the Temple, it was understandable that the religious leaders misunderstood him, but now Nicodemus must be stupid—or perverse—not to know what Jesus is talking about. He knows very well that Jesus isn’t talking about being *biologically* born again.

One possibility is that what John portrays here is Nicodemus playing dumb, pretending to think Jesus is saying something absurd so as to ridicule him. Another, maybe better, possibility is that John here caricatures the Jewish religious leaders, portraying Nicodemus as comically obtuse, so entrenched in this world’s perspective that he’s in the dark about what God is doing. Being in the dark in this way is a pervasive theme in John’s Gospel. They rejected Jesus, the incarnate presence of the very God of Israel. They cannot comprehend the God made flesh in Jesus in terms of their world; there was no moral sense, no political sense, no religious sense to be made of him. For them, this Jesus who claims that belief in *him* is the eternal life that God gives, could only be ludicrous, unintelligible. This rightly elicits the astonished, “*How can these things be?!*”

Nicodemus knew what made sense: the long awaited salvation that God would give as a response to Israel's rigorous efforts to be pure from gentile contamination and to strictly to adhere to Torah. This is a God whose ways are predictable, a God with whom you know where you are. It was, ultimately, a domesticated God, a God contained and controlled, not the God Moses met in the burning bush, the God who is utterly free to come and deliver, to save, to bring life from death, in whatever way he pleases, for whomever he pleases. God's Spirit blows where it chooses. The religious powers Nicodemus represents can only find Jesus' talk of *himself* as the new life from God, a life freely given to all, Jew and Gentile, clean and unclean, good and bad as crazy, as crazy as talk of an adult returning to his mother's womb.

The impulse to domesticate God, even to hear Jesus' call to the new life that comes from above as something humanly manageable, is still with us. The other day I saw one of those *Globe Trekker* travel programs about the southeastern United States. One episode featured a baptism on the coast of Georgia. While the secular interviewer respectfully nodded, the minister explained that the white-robed converts gamboling in the surf were being baptized to symbolize their decision to lead a new life, to give up their bad ways, and to become better people. They were, he enthusiastically announced, "*born again.*" There's nothing wrong with the desire to become a better person, but we miss the point as drastically as Nicodemus did if we try to make of being born from above merely a divinely sanctioned turn from the bad to the good, one more of our attempts to reform or improve ourselves.

So what is it, then, to be born again? The truth, of course, is that for most of us this language is something of an embarrassment. It's the language of another time and place, perhaps of a Flannery O'Connor South where sinners are frantically saved at the end of the sawdust trail, perhaps just the jejune vocabulary of a long-ago childhood in the custody of the theologically unsophisticated, as it is for me (I was born again so many times as a child it's surprising I did not wind up a Hindu.) Can we bring Jesus' words about being born to new life to life here and now?

Nick Hornby's darkly comic novel, *A Long Way Down*, begins when four strangers meet on New Year's Eve on the roof of an apartment block in north London. Topper's House is London's most popular suicide spot. Martin, Maureen, Jess, and JJ have come there to jump. As it happens, when the New Year arrives they have not ended their lives. They've made a grudging, non-suicide pact, to live until Valentine's Day, and they make their way down. It's mostly just luck and accident that they don't go through with it. No sudden realization that life is, after all, worth living. They agree to delay, but do not abandon, their decision to top themselves. No epiphany, no revelation—there's a story about seeing an angel who looks like Matt Damon but it's invented by Jess for sale to the tabloids (with disastrous results)—just a group of damaged, dysfunctional, self-absorbed human beings hesitantly putting their faith in something unseen and unlikely, tentatively letting despair turn into hope...at least for now. It's a long way down, back to life and love, and it's unclear where, or how hard, they'll land. At no point is it certain that their lives will be good, or even bearable; there's no guarantee that any one of them will make it, and not end up back on the roof of Topper's House. They have nothing in common

but the shared experience of having been to the brink and back; because of that they can sometimes help one another, but they hurt one another too. They do not necessarily become better people. They do not become immune to the forces that brought them to the edge of death, but they start to become people who gratefully accept the life that is graciously and mysteriously given them. In a way, their old lives ended on that New Year's Eve, and a new life began as they started their "long way down." The old life was shaped by fear and death; the new life by hope and faith, however hesitant.

To me, the little band of survivors in *A Long Way Down* represents something of what it means to be "born again," to be given, in utter grace, a life that is not fully one's own, and to take it up despite oneself and against one's better judgment. And, against the plausibilities of this world, to put one's trust, and set one's hopes, in a life that points beyond itself to a love that promises to heal us. To be "born again," "born from above," doesn't have much to do with "conversion," at least as that is conventionally understood. It is, I think, to find ourselves drawn to Jesus right now, with whatever degree of courage and conviction, doubt and disbelief, that we happen to have brought with us today, recognizing that we have no life but the life of God made flesh in him, and that the only future for which we can hope is with him.

Amen

