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Seeking: How to begin again?

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If you count all the questions people ask Jesus, you will find at least 187. Some questions spring from the depth of a troubled soul. Some questions ache to confirm their dreams about God and themselves are true. Some questions attempt to corner and convict him.

Out of those, almost 200 questions, Jesus answers, maybe eight, some scholars say only three.

A good teacher knows that questions provoke, rouse emotions, entice the mind to construct a new meaning. Jesus asks, more than 300 questions. He asks the kind of questions whose answers are as plain as day but might cost us to answer truthfully. Some of the questions he asks might feel unanswerable.

Growing in faith requires us to sit in the complexity of a good question, to learn, maybe faith isn't about certainty. Maybe faith is letting a question gnaw open a place within you, inviting you to lean in further, and further, to the tender place of spiritual hunger, and allow an answer to form. Then it gets tested, and nudges you to new confidence, so you bring the answer to light in your life.

Let's follow a man whose question to Jesus and Jesus' multiple questions in response propel him through the Gospel of John.

From John's ethereal introduction of "in the beginning was the Word," the story builds by telling us Jesus embodies the "true light, which enlightens all people."

Then Jesus plants his feet firmly in our world.

John's gospel refers to Jesus' divine acts as signs rather than miracles.

He reveals his divine origin through the first *sign* when he changes water to wine at a wedding. And then, he gets to work. He enters Jerusalem during the Passover and overturns all the money changers' tables in the temple.

By doing so, he upsets the foundation of Jewish customs and the economic pyramid. You want to get people's attention, go after the money. Then he performs many signs, which the writer tells us brought the people to believe in him.

Before I read what happens next, please pray with me.

Dear God, your spirit like the wind, blows where it will. Let it blow into our minds, stir us to listen, and to believe through these words. Let your spirit blow into our hearts that we may feel your abundant love, strong enough to claim us, gentle enough to hold our fears, and persistent enough to keep us. Amen.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

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."

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

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?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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."

Nicodemus said to him, "*How can these things be?*"

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"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.

"If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"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.

At the time John wrote his gospel, you risked your life to be a Christian. The temple had fallen. Roman soldiers massacred Christians and Jews in the uprising and the streets ran with blood.

This writer sets up dualities of light and dark, that echo from the beginning of the story aligning with a continuum between belief and unbelief. The world crisis would force you to choose between the crumbling establishment or those brazen revolutionaries.

If someone congregated with Jesus' followers, in the light of day, it was as if they announce, "I am one of them," and renounce any status and security.¹

Nicodemus appears at the beginning of the story to serve as an everyman character, someone with whom anyone can identify. We learn two important things, right off the bat.

His day job earns him considerable power and respect.

The other is that he comes to Jesus not in the light of day, when everyone can see, but under cover of night. And if that strikes us as an odd series of events – that a respectable leader with power in the community would wait until dark to visit the Light of the World – then we're tracking right where John wants us to begin.

When such a such a prominent person approaches Jesus, this writer destabilizes the idea for his readers that only the marginalized, the desperate, and those with nothing to lose, will accept Jesus.

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007)

As an everyman character, Nicodemus is not confined to the past. He lives in the heart of every believer whose dark night of the soul presses upon them.

The recent college grad disillusioned by the racism in the workplace.

The mom so tired from constantly acquiescing in a social circle that tries to ban books and limit learning.

The executive who has rung the bell, so to say, and finds his industry abandoning the ethic he treasured.

We all wonder at times.

Being Nicodemus-like gives us permission to question when the daily-grind challenges our sense of purpose, or a crisis has rocked the foundation we thought secure, and the disciplines of religion, economics, or law, or medicine do not have the ultimate answers.

Nicodemus says to Jesus, “we know you are a teacher who has come from God...no one can do these signs...apart from the presence of God.” He asks, “how can these things be?”

Jesus tells him to be born of the spirit. In cryptic words, he directs this religious authority to let go of the certitudes that bind him. Begin again.

That’s a mind-blowing response to a man of intellect, prompting another question, “how can one begin again?”

Then Jesus reminds him of the way God saved the ancient Israelites from their greatest fear while fleeing Egypt.

He sparks a flashback to the time when serpents infested the ground, killing those bitten. The Israelites cry to Moses to be saved, to get God to “take away the serpents from us” (Numbers 21:7). But the serpents do not go away, nor do they stop biting. Instead, God instructs Moses to lift a bronze serpent on a stick and promises anyone who had been bitten to commit their minds to it, look upon it, and live.

Nicodemus knows this story: deliverance does not come in the way that they expect. Deliverance comes, not in being removed from the wilderness, but by facing what you think is your demise and believing God. Think of it this way: the bronze serpent takes what was for the wandering Israelites one of the very worst things in the world (a lethal snake) and remakes it into one of the very best (a life-saving instrument of healing).

Jesus seizes this opening, “just as Moses lifted the serpent,” so too will he be lifted up.”

The cross of which Jesus speaks was an imperial weapon of torture and death until God divinely remakes into a sign of hope and new life.²

²Matthew Myers Boulton, Gospel: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 2, *Salt Project*, March 5, 2023.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/2/gospel-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-2>

Now comes the hard part. Nicodemus needs to begin again by believing Jesus is God's son and through him, God promises eternal life. Believing is the hard part.

In John's gospel, believing is what you do with your life. Our English word "believe" comes from the German word "belieben" - to love.³ To believe is not to hold an opinion. To believe brings one to care for another. To believe compels you to doing something for everyone and anyone by feeding them, protecting them. To believe animates your way of life.

How do you begin again? Sometimes you believe despite your mind and let your experience of doing reveal the truth.

Once Nicodemus has seen the reality of Jesus, he cannot unsee it. He makes two smaller, cameo appearances in John's gospel.

When the Pharisees confront Jesus, to imprison him without trial, Nicodemus stands up to them by demanding respect for Jesus. Then, on the last day of Jesus' life, Nicodemus watches

³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

as Jesus is lifted up on the cross. In the light of day, he joins with another to claim the body and gives Jesus a burial fit for a king.

Like Nicodemus, our problem is that we get so stuck in our own ways that to suspend our intellect or risk our social standing preclude us from stepping into the fullness of faith.

How do you begin again? By admitting the answers evade you, by laying down your well-honed story of what you've done, by letting that desire chew within you, night after night, and by facing the thing that paralyzes you the most.

I hope you will sit with this discomfort in Lent. Let these questions from Jesus upset your life.

For the Israelites – they faced a bronze serpent. For Nicodemus – the cross of Christ. For you – what scares you.

How do you begin again? By doing Jesus' work. You begin again by simply doing what he invites you to do. Care for others. Right now. You come to believe by doing. And when you stumble, he picks you up, and you begin again.

It reminds me of a conversation between two friends. One was dating a fella whom she really thought, was the one. But, his teenage daughter caused all sorts of friction she feared would crater their future.

The other friend had married a guy who'd brought a bunch of kids into their home, and it had not been an easy settling-in as stepmom. So the single one asked, "how you to decide to love his kids?" The other remained silent for a bit. "You don't decide or measure or wait. Just love them. Then love them some more. One day you realize there is no going back."



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