

How Can These Things Be?

by

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May 30, 2021

John 3:1-21

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.”⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”¹¹ “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.”¹² “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”¹³ “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”¹⁴ “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,”¹⁵ “that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”¹⁶ “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.”¹⁷ “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.”¹⁸ “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”¹⁹ “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”²⁰ “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”²¹ “But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Sigal Samuel, former religion editor for the Atlantic and current columnist for the online magazine Vox recently conducted a survey among her readers about how they were feeling about these past few weeks of loosening COVID restrictions and a slow reentry back into the world.

Many of us are feeling anxious about returning to normal, having realized that our pre-pandemic lives contained a lot that we're better off without. When I asked Vox readers if they were nervous about the return to normalcy, nearly 100 people responded with a resounding "yes." They're worried about the awkwardness of re-acclimating to social life. They're worried about returning to commutes and office work that added to their stress and chipped away at their quality of life. And they're worried about returning to a new normal that looks much like the old normal — one whose flaws the pandemic threw into sharp relief.

As I read the responses, it struck me that there are actually two kinds of worry here. One is the anxiety we feel about doing anything we haven't had to do in a while. For example, those of us who've had the luxury of working from home may find it nerve-racking to go back to commuting in a crowded subway car or making small talk around the water cooler. "When you haven't practiced in a while, anything can become harder or less fluent."

But there's a second category of worry here. And this one, arguably, might be worth cultivating: the worry about returning to a global normal we'd rather not come back to. The pandemic broke open public discourse around issues that were either typically sidestepped — mental health struggles, for instance — or accepted with little resistance, like the rigidity of the modern workday. Will returning to normal life mean sweeping these hard conversations back under the rug?

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "There are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I

call upon you to be maladjusted.” The people I heard from expressed the concern that the world would quickly readjust to an unjust normal.¹

While we are for sure living today in an unprecedented moment in the course of human history, our text for this morning from the gospel of John reminds us that this is not the first time nor will it be the last time that the world has been given the opportunity to embrace a new normal, to look at the world and our place in it in a way that is so positively maladjusted that it almost doesn't even make sense.

In this familiar story of the Pharisee Nicodemus coming to Jesus in the night to ask a question about how it is that Jesus is able to do the things that he does, Nicodemus comes to realize that his world view and this new and challenging Rabbi from Nazareth's world view are completely different.

Nicodemus says - these, are the things that I know are true about the world and about God, and Jesus says in response - you haven't even begun to understand how that world has changed around you. And Nicodemus descends into an existential crisis.

Nicodemus identifies Jesus as being from God based on an old interpretation of the Law, but Jesus explains to Nicodemus that the signs that Jesus has been doing are so outside of the mold of anything that God has ever done before that there is a whole dimension of the world and a whole new potential for human beings that Nicodemus hasn't even conceived of yet.

It is a new world and Jesus tells Nicodemus that we are called to become new people not just to be able to live in it, but to be able to transformed by it.

This is the most difficult part for Nicodemus to understand - when Jesus tells him that he must be born from above - or born again as the Greek can also be translated - Nicodemus stays stuck in his literal brain.

¹ <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/22394635/anxiety-back-to-normal-covid-19-pandemic>

“How can these things be?” How can one re-enter again into our mother’s womb.

Too often many of us - including me - have also gotten stuck like Nicodemus and pushed back against the ways that an invitation to be “born again” becomes a litmus test for genuine faith in Jesus Christ. But just like Nicodemus we are also invited to reframe a traditional interpretation of this particular passage to be willing to acknowledge that God through Jesus Christ is constantly inviting us to be born again, attempting to transform each of us into something new beyond the places where we have gotten stuck, dug in our heels, lost our way, fallen into bad habits, or fallen out of practice. That just like all human beings we often find it easier sit in the dark rather than to step into the light.

We are just like Nicodemus - because just like Nicodemus we are all works in progress. The Gospel doesn’t tell us how long it took Nicodemus to experience this new birth, it doesn’t tell us if his re-orientation to a new world view came in a singular moment, or through a series of fits and starts. It doesn’t tell us how many times he had to start over in order to start anew. But we know that mid-way through Jesus’ ministry as told to us in the Gospel of John that Nicodemus steps out of the dark and into the light and confronts his colleagues and temple police questioning their interpretation of the law that was leading towards the unjust persecution of Jesus and his followers.

And we know that at the end of Jesus life that Nicodemus was one of those who carried his body to the tomb and prepared it for burial. A moment of public witness and a moment of private practice to model for us what it can look like to be a transformed disciple of Jesus Christ in a radically changing world.

For each of us as individuals our rebirth into this new post pandemic world will look slightly different. While we have been adamant over the past 14 months to say that the church has never closed, it is clearly the truth that many of us are out of practice when it comes to practicing our faith in the ways we did before the pandemic, and we are

still attempting to understand together what will change about who we are as a whole community of faith as we step into this new world as a reborn congregation.

Stephanie Paulsell is a professor of theology at Harvard and recently reflected on what it will mean to return not just to the classroom, but to the world over the next few months, using the devotional classic - *The Interior Castle*, Teresa of Ávila's exploration of the pathways of the human journey toward God.

It might seem counterintuitive to read an account of an inward journey to think about a journey back out into the world, but Teresa seems always to be looking in both directions at once. The whole point of the journey inward, she writes, is to make ourselves fit for service to our neighbor; the whole point is to love more.

The first thing I noticed was her acknowledgment of how hard it is to get started on a new path, how weary it made her feel. I'm writing this book under obedience, she says on the first page, and I'm already finding it hard. God hasn't given me any desire for this work, and my head is so full of noise that I can barely compose a letter about the most ordinary business, much less a book about prayer. She sounds like anyone who has ever tried to start a new creative project: unsure if she has it in her to do, fearful of all it will require.

The regathering and reopening that we are inching toward is a great creative project, especially if we see it not as a return to the way things were but as a chance to do things differently. It's daunting, as Teresa knew, to push past our fear that we're not up to the task.

One of the temptations on the journey toward God, Teresa says, is the temptation to feel satisfied with where we are. Moving through the first three rooms of the interior castle, she says, we might begin to feel that we have found a stopping place. We pray, we meditate, we cultivate virtues. Why not be satisfied with that good life? Teresa wants us to be

*dissatisfied. There's so much more to explore on the path to God, she writes. We can love more; we can act with more justice and truth. We have the capacity for so much more transformation, so much more change.*²

I am assuming that over the past year you have already had experiences of change somewhat similar to Nicodemus - where you understand the world to work in one way, where you continue to try to cling to all of the things that were true in early March 2020, and then are confronted with what can feel like an alternative reality that you aren't sure you know how to navigate anymore. It was honestly for me the most disorienting part of the whole pandemic, because even as I found it within myself to adjust to a new way of being a pastor or a Christian, or frankly a human in this moment, something else would change and I would once again feel lost or ready to just give up on the whole thing.

That cycle, that adjustment, that reorientation is far from over as we stumble back into the world together. But what I hope we have learned this past year are the ways that reorientation can be for good.

We could have never imagined a year and a half ago that members of our church would be open to and excited about creating personal and vulnerable connections with each other through an online video conferencing platform. If we had tried to create a ministry like that from scratch, pre-pandemic, I am not sure any of us would have been able to wrap our heads around its potential and frankly the joy and growth it has meant for so many in our congregation.

Even one year ago this weekend, I am also not sure we could have imagined what it would look like for us as a whole congregation to respond so compassionately to the call for racial justice and reconciliation that we have experienced since the death of George Floyd one year ago this week. The time so many of you have taken to read, to

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/world-reopens-post-pandemic-how-will-we-find-our-way-it>

be challenged, to be in conversation not just with each other but with our neighbors on these issues has been enormous. If that pandemic reorientation and the exposure to the historical and contemporary trauma of racism hadn't shaken us out of our old ways of understanding the world and our place in it, how much slower would these conversations have continued to be.

But even though this has been good work, it has been hard work. I am confident that the person most of us are now, exhausted, traumatized, grieving, maybe a little disconnected from the practices of faith that used to bring meaning, and even just a little meh, are not the people we are supposed to be. In this moment, we are all deserving of a rebirth, a transformation of our whole way of being and understanding the world and our faith. When this actually happens it might feel like we have begun life all over again but it won't happen overnight.

Even though we each have hopes of who we will become as individuals or as a church, or even hopes of what the world will be like, anyone who claims to know what any of that will look like even six months from now is only guessing and only operating from what we know is true about the world as of today.

The only thing Jesus asked Nicodemus to do that night and the only thing we are being asked to do today is to begin, to allow the spirit to move among and within us, to understand that this new birth will take paying more attention to the unexpected movements of the spirit, and to not really think about this moment as a slow ending to what has been a pretty hard year, but the slow beginning of something we don't really understand just yet.

Irish Poet David Whyte says this about beginnings:

Beginning well or beginning poorly, what is important is simply to begin, but the ability to make a good beginning is also an art form, beginning well involves a clearing away of the crass, the irrelevant and the complicated to find the beautiful, often hidden traces of the essential and the necessary.

There occurs in effect, a form of internal corporate downsizing, where the parts of us too afraid to participate or having nothing now to offer, are let go...It is always hard to believe that the courageous step is so close to us, that it is closer than we ever could imagine, that in fact, we already know what it is, and that the step is simpler, more radical than we had thought³.

May we accept the invitation to a new beginning to step into the light, as many times as it takes to be transformed in to the next thing God is calling us to be. Amen.

³ David Whyte, *CONSOLATIONS: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, 2015.