

The Rev. Kristin Krantz  
St. James', Mt. Airy  
5/27/18

Trinity Sunday B  
Isaiah 6:1-8  
Psalm 29  
Romans 8:12-17  
John 3:1-17

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

Today is a day when it I have to say it's too bad we can't all read and understand Greek, the original language of the Gospel of John, because our English translation just doesn't cut it. Unless we read from an annotated Bible and pay attention to the footnotes, it forces us to see God in one dimension; it limits our understanding of the divine; and it limits our faithful response to God.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, is an example of just such limitation—though it was of his own making.

To give a bit of background, the two stories immediately preceding today's gospel are the miracle at the wedding of Cana and Jesus cleansing the Temple—stories centering on the signs pointing to Jesus' identity. And so Nicodemus went by night to meet with Jesus in Jerusalem, and upon finding him exclaimed, "Rabbi, we know that you are teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

To be born anōthen speaks both of a time of birth ("again") and the place from which this new birth is generated ("from above"). It is both temporal (horizontal) and transcendent (vertical). When this passage is translated into English it is always either into 'from above' (like our translation today does) or 'again' (like other translations do)—which means the ambiguity

is lost and a choice has been made for us.

What choice would you make? To be born from above? Or to be born again? Or could you be both?

That very idea was not one that Nicodemus could grasp—and so he responded to Jesus at the most literal level. “How can anyone be born after growing old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

I have empathy for Nicodemus here—I can see that he feels his encounter with Jesus is spinning in a direction he didn’t intend. He came to Jesus feeling assured of who Jesus was, with a certainty about what was possible. And when faced with a loss of that perceived identity and certainty, instead of opening himself up to the possibility of change, he grasped for control.

It was his grasping, closed, fists that prevented him from accepting Jesus’ teaching about being born both again and from above.

“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.’

Again Jesus tries to lead Nicodemus into the full meaning of his words. To be born again and from above is to be born of water and Spirit. Entrance into the kingdom of God will require

a double birth: a physical birth (one of water) and also a spiritual rebirth (one of the Spirit).

For us, like the early Christians, the imagery of baptism here is remarkable. But like baptism—being born from above and again is not a once for all event. It is merely the seed of transformation.

“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.”

The Greek word for “wind,” *pneuma*, like *anōthen*, has two inherent meanings; it means both “wind” and “spirit.” This word perfectly captures the essence of Jesus’ message—the wind/spirit blows where it wills; and while humans can perceive its presence, they cannot determine where it goes. Jesus’ offer of new birth is like the wind/spirit—a mystery beyond human knowledge and control.

And Nicodemus said, “How can these things be?”

How often has our own faith been a Nicodemus faith? Seeking God, but not willing to let go of our need for control. Stubbornly refusing to see the complexity of God and instead wanting an easy answer, a simple faith. It brings to mind that pithy sentiment ‘Let go and let God.’ And yet, there is real truth in that.