

“God’s Reckoning”  
Genesis 12:1-4; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17;  
John 3:1-17

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A shadowy figure moved through the community. He was flitting from one shadow to the next. It was a dark night—no moon that night and, with no streetlights, the stars seemed bright. Finally he found the door he was looking for and knocked. Slowly it opened a little bit. A surprised face looked out and, seeing the doorman, this shadowy figure asked if he could come in. The surprised doorkeeper opened the door and in walked this fellow. As he took off his cloak, most of those there recognized him. You see, it was Nicodemus, a leader in his community. It was a strange thing for him to come at that time of night through the darkness, out of the shadows, into the flickering lamplight.

As we hear the story, there’s not a whole lot of chit chat. He goes directly to the teacher and says, “Teacher, I know you are from God. You couldn’t do all these things if you weren’t.” It’s an introduction of who Jesus is in the story, but there’s no second question. Jesus doesn’t ask him why he’s here. He doesn’t ask what his question is. He simply launches in and says, “You must be born again.”

It’s kind of a shocking story in a lot of ways—out of the darkness directly into this conversation, and a shocking statement: You must be born again; born from above. Nicodemus definitely takes it as born again because he says, “How can that be? I can’t go back into my mother’s womb. I can’t be born again.” It sets up this shocking experience, coming out of the darkness, a confusion, the idea of being born again. What’s that all about?

We hear Jesus responding, “Are you really a leader in the community and you don’t know all this? Why are you so confused?” There’s this sense of a leader not understanding Jesus, and Jesus not quite understanding him. It’s a little shocking and confusing. But the idea of being born again is the crux of it at this point.

We have heard it a lot and perhaps we can identify how we, as human beings, like to take things we hear and make them into rules or ways of defining things. I don’t think Jesus was saying, “Here is a way to define who is a Christian and who is not.” I think he’s describing something that is a little deeper than that; something that occurs when we open ourselves to God.

It’s that leader coming in the night that makes me think about how hard it is for us to hear something new. Why did he come at night? Was he afraid that people would say he was disloyal if he talked to Jesus? There’s a lot of struggle going on with how we understand things, and what Jesus is doing here is, in a way, opening up and encouraging us to recognize that when we encounter God, something new begins. Sometimes we talk about being born again as if it’s the end of something. But how

could being born be the end? What is that idea of being born again about? What begins at that point?

What this whole conflict between these folks makes me think about is how we understand things. I have heard a number of people saying these days that there is a sense, particularly today where it's so focused on thinking we should know things within, that it is all about how *we* feel, it's how *we* think, it's *my* way of seeing things. Some research recently suggests when we go to a talk we will often listen and find the very things that we expected to hear, and basically we consolidate our own position, our own way of seeing and hearing and thinking, and go out confirming it from what we heard. We can have people on very different sides of the issue do the same thing with the same talk. It's just an astounding kind of thing.

It feels to me like in some respects that's what's happening here. Nicodemus' view is, "We have this understanding," but somehow Jesus is opening a crack and saying something new. Nicodemus has seen that. He doesn't want to do anything publicly, but thought maybe he could come at night and find out what that crack is about, what that different way of seeing is about. Then Jesus starts talking about being born again and about a Spirit that blows wherever it wills.

You know, if I have a pretty good sense of how things are, I'm not real excited about somebody telling me that it's really about something that you can't see where it comes from or where it goes. I'm not real excited about being told that I should be born again, that is to begin to see things in a new way, struggle with the way God might be working, rather than just being caught in my own way of seeing things.

I don't think we're told how Nicodemus goes away. Does he recognize what Jesus is telling him? As we hear the story, Jesus is inviting us to open ourselves to the work of the Spirit, which we don't know where it's coming from or where it's going, nor does it say that the people that are born of that Spirit necessarily know either. But there is a way that the Spirit fills our sails. It somehow begins to take us places. Having been born, there's a journey to go on.

I think that's why they chose the passage about Abram. It's a similar kind of thing. When God enters one's life, he may ask us to go on a journey, not to stay where we are, but to discover where he's taking us. Not because we know ahead of time, but because we follow him, because his spirit fills our sails.

Jesus says the reason for all that is because God so loves the world that he gave his only Son so that no one need perish, for he came not to condemn the world, but to save it. There is the fulcrum. There is the balance point. There is the reason for the rebirth. But why do we need that? Why would we think about doing such a thing? Why would we say maybe the ways I'm thinking aren't complete?

If we kept reading, Jesus would tell us that when we don't do that, we've already brought judgment on ourselves. We all have a sense that there is some kind of

reckoning that needs to happen or that we will face. There is a way in which Jesus says, "You are already facing that. Your actions, the way you live, have consequences. You can have a sense of judgment. You can experience things that aren't good. You can experience the struggle. When you've done an action, you can experience the consequences of that action. How do we go in a direction where the consequences are good rather where the consequences are not?"

That's what this is all about. It's about the idea of recognizing that the way I think is partial. What I know, I know in part. I may someday know in full, but today whatever I know is partial. I need help, and yet I live in a world that tells me that I should never need help, that I am independent. The truth is I am dependent. I have run up against this multiple times in my life. Maybe you haven't. Those times where I thought I was right and ended up clearly seeing I was wrong. Finding consequences from my actions that I didn't expect or that if I had really thought about, I would have seen.

Sometimes I wonder if what Jesus is doing here is saying you've got to take a step back and open up your life to the work of the Spirit. In our world, so often we are told to think quick, be on your feet. The person who has the quick come-back is the one who is right. All we end up doing is working out of a set of instincts or a set of things we think we already know. There's a guy who wrote a book called "Think Fast, Think Slow." He suggests that when we try to think fast and use our instincts we often make a lot of mistakes, especially in this modern world which our instincts aren't really set up to deal with. But if we take the time and actually use our ability to think, it helps.

I think Jesus is going a step more, saying not only do you need to take a step back and think, but you need to open up to the one who will really help you. There is a God who teaches us, whose Spirit will enter into our lives and help us grow into the human beings God created us to be. We need not feel like we're perishing, or actually *be* perishing, but can be healed, can be saved through God's love incarnate given to us.

So often when I think about a reckoning, when I think about the kind of reckoning that I deserve, it's not always that great. But when I hear about how God reckoned with Abraham as described by Paul, God reckoned his faith as righteousness. God's reckoning is grace. Our reckoning? God's reckoning. And when we allow it to be God's reckoning, then we can recognize the new life God gives us and maybe our sails can be filled and we can go places we may not dream of. He talks about it as eternity; a place beyond my conception, but good and great, and full of God's grace. Amen.