

Fire. For just a moment, before we delve into the story of Nicodemus's conversation with Jesus, I want you to think about fire. Close your eyes and imagine a fire and listen to how one professor of mythological studies describes this archetypical element:

It fascinates and frightens, warms and scorches. Too little and we die. Too much and we die. It sings, dances, plays, inspires, destroys. It purifies and consumes. In a burning bush, it marked the presence of God. In a volcano, Pele surges into raw life. Among the flames in a smithy, Bridgid and Hephaestus craft wonders of magic. Around ancient hearths, food was cooked, deities worshiped, songs sung, tales told, babies birthed, the sick and dying comforted. Ancient ritual originated in dance and drumming around sacred fire. In many cultures, a new day is born at sunset and nurtured in firelight -- by the time dawn arrives, the day is already old. Fire hides in trees and hides in stars, and most of all, hides in hearts.

So writes Dr. Kathleen Jenks, Professor of Mythological Studies at Pacifica Graduate Institute. (*Fire: Sacrality & Lore*)

The Jewish culture of First Century Palestine was one of those cultures in which "a new day is born at sunset and nurtured in firelight." A child of that culture, Nicodemus's coming to Jesus by night isn't a coming at the end of the day, but a coming at the beginning of the day: our Gospel Lesson begins, as does the story of creation, in darkness and God brings

forth light! Nicodemus starts a new day in the dark, seeking enlightenment.

This is such a familiar story, isn't it? Nicodemus coming to Jesus to ask ... well, we aren't really sure what he came to ask. The conversation we heard today is like many in John's Gospel, only partially related and set out in a way to make John's point. In this instance, the Gospeler seems to be underscoring the mystery of salvation!

Some have argued that the detail about Nicodemus coming in the night is meant to show that he was afraid of discovery by Jews hostile to Jesus and his mission. (Cf. "Commentary" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* [Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1995]: "Nicodemus hides his seeking under the cloak of night." Vol. IX, p. 548.) Others argue that a nighttime conversation underscores the seriousness of the conversation. William Barclay, in his famous commentary, writes:

The rabbis declared that the best time to study the law was at night when a man was undisturbed. Throughout the day Jesus was surrounded by crowds of people all the time. It may well be that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he wanted an absolutely private and completely undisturbed time with Jesus. (*The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1, Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1975, p. 124)

Rudolf Bultmann, the famous German Lutheran Bible scholar, in his commentary on this gospel offers a similar comment:

There is no indication that his coming by night was occasioned by his

'fear of the Jews' (19.38). It is more likely that this is intended to show his great zeal, in the same way as nocturnal study is recommended by the Rabbis.... (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1971, p. 133 n. 5)

Bultmann, however, argues that John's principal purpose in relating the nighttime setting is an "intention of creating an air of mystery." He writes:

The nocturnal setting and style of the dialogue ... give the whole passage an air of mystery, which is developed in a three-fold sense as the mystery of rebirth, the mystery of the Son of Man, and the mystery of the witness. But above all an air of mystery lies over the whole passage, because Jesus only speaks of the Revealer in the third person and never discloses himself by an *[I am]*-saying. (*Ibid.*, p. 133)

Perhaps the most mysterious thing Jesus says in the whole passage is his insistence that one be born "from above." (3:3) This puzzles Nicodemus as much as it puzzles us. The Greek term used by John to relate Jesus's words is *ανωθεν* (*anōthen*), an ambiguous word which can mean "from above" or "from the beginning" or "again". Nicodemus assumes it means "again." But Jesus makes it clear that it is the first meaning that he has in mind when he reiterates his insistence in different words: "[N]o one can enter the kingdom of God without being born *of water and Spirit*." (3:5, emphasis added.)

So, you may be wondering why I would choose to begin meditating on this week's Gospel Lesson with a reference to the element of *fire*. I admit that it may seem a bit odd inasmuch as Jesus does not mention fire he mentions water and he mentions the wind (i.e., the air), but he does not mention fire. But we enter our reflection on this gospel with fire because Jesus insists we be born *of Spirit*. The recently introduced Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church contains this precis of the Biblical symbolism of fire:

While water signifies birth and the fruitfulness of life given in the Holy Spirit, fire symbolizes the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit's actions. The prayer of the prophet Elijah, who "arose like fire" and whose "word burned like a torch," brought down fire from heaven on the sacrifice on Mount Carmel. This event was a "figure" of the fire of the Holy Spirit, who transforms what he touches. John the Baptist, who goes "before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah," proclaims Christ as the one who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Jesus will say of the Spirit: "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!" In the form of tongues "as of fire," the Holy Spirit rests on the disciples on the morning of Pentecost and fills them with himself. The spiritual tradition has retained this symbolism of fire as one of the most expressive images of the Holy Spirit's actions. "Do not quench the Spirit." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, The Profession of Faith,*

Section Two, Chapter Three, Art. 8, Para. 696, "Fire," *footnotes omitted.*)

The same point is made in *Easton's 1897 Bible Dictionary* when it states that "fire is a symbol of Jehovah's presence and the instrument of his power."

The last sentence in the Roman Catechism is a quote from St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians: "Do not quench the Spirit." For Paul, fire was the very image of God's Spirit. To the Corinthians he wrote that the Day of the Lord would "be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each [person] has done." (1 Cor. 3:13, NRSV) To the young bishop Timothy he wrote, "[F]an into flames the spiritual gift God gave you...." (2 Tim 1:6, New Living Trans.)

So this is what Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born of water and the fiery Spirit of God." No wonder Nicodemus was confused. Nicodemus is as much a child of Greek culture as of Jewish ... the Greeks had established in the "scientific" understanding of his world the idea that the Cosmos was made up of Four Elements: water, earth, fire, and air. Everything was made up of combinations of these four primal ingredients, except when those elements were "opposites" and did not mix. Earth and air did not mix; fire and water did not mix. So Jesus answer to Nicodemus is really no answer at all - it was simply an impossibility and so his answer simply raises more questions! "Be born of water and fire?" Seen through

the lens of the ancients' understanding of the Four Elements, what Jesus asks is incomprehensible! Fire and water cannot be combined.... What is he talking about? "How can these things be?" asks Nicodemus.

I may have mentioned from this pulpit before that in my pre-ordination life as a litigation attorney one of my specialties was handling questionable fire cases. I learned a lot about fires, fire suppression, fire investigation and so forth. One of the things I learned is that there are certain fires against which water has no effect. In fact, there are fires which burn so hot that water actually fuels them -- the addition of water to such fires, rather than dampen them, causes explosions!

This is what Jesus seems to be looking for ... the fire of the Spirit combined with "living water" resulting in something explosive and uncontrollable ... a transformative rebirth, the creation of a "new human being." That's probably not what Nicodemus wanted to hear!

John doesn't tell us how old Nicodemus was, but this leader of the Jews hints at his age when he asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" (3:4) Thus, the tradition has grown up that Nicodemus was an old man. For example, in his book *What is Regeneration?*, the Chinese evangelist Witness Lee writes, "Nicodemus was an old man of perhaps sixty or seventy years of age." No wonder he asks Jesus in disbelief, "How can these things be?" (3:9) Nicodemus needs to remember his ancestor Abraham.

Our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures is a short one, the first three-and-a-half verses of Genesis, chapter 12. Let me read it for you again:

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.

Our reading, for some reason, leaves off the last sentence of verse four: "Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran." Can you imagine starting all over at age 75? Now that's what I call being born again. How did Abram arrive at this renascence? Did it happen all at once? Perhaps not...

Abram was a native of the ancient city of Ur. An article in the December 2001 *National Geographic* speculated, "He may have worshiped Sin, the god of the moon and Ur's chief deity." The author wrote: "I wondered if, somehow, Abraham's reflections on the moon god had led him to the idea that the world is governed by one God." (p. 106) Abram's rebirth (marked by the change of his name to "Abraham") may have been a gradual thing.

That's the way fire is sometimes. Coals may smolder unseen; embers

may burn unnoticed. That's the way Christian rebirth is sometimes, too. I don't know who wrote this paragraph, but I know that what it says is true:

Noted evangelist Billy Graham says that he can point back to a definite time in his life when he experienced conversion. But his wife, Ruth, says that she grew gradually into the faith and can point to no definite starting point. Her experience is similar to the testimony of Count Von Zinzendorf to John Wesley. When Wesley asked him if he knew when he was saved, he replied, "I have always been saved!" A very famous churchman's reply to the same question was, "I was saved nearly two thousand years ago, on a hill called Golgotha, outside the city of Jerusalem." And this is the main point of the biblical witness: Our Salvation was accomplished nearly two thousand years ago in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the one true Son of God. The meaning that this past event has for us today, our response to that event, and our willingness to believe is crucial for us. It doesn't matter so much when we come to believe as it does that we believe.

It is this coming to belief, to faith, instantly or gradually, that Jesus seems to mean when he insists that we must be "born again."

The author of the annotations to this Gospel Lesson in *The New Interpreter's Bible* makes the point that "the use of the phrase 'born again' ... has become a slogan and rallying cry" which repeats Nicodemus's

misunderstanding. That author writes:

By codifying the expression "born again" and turning it into a slogan, interpreters risk losing the powerful offer of new life contained in Jesus' words. Nicodemus and the reader are intended to struggle with the expression "born *anōthen*" in order to discern what kind of new birth is at the same time birth from above. In that struggle of interpretation, the reader is called to listen to all of Jesus' words in this text, not just a few of them. As the reader moves with Nicodemus and Jesus through this dialogue and into the discourse, a fresh and fuller understanding of "born *anōthen*" emerges. "Born *anōthen*" is complicated to interpret because its language and its promise transcend conventional categories. It envisions a new mode of life for which there are no precedents, life born of water *and* the Spirit, life regenerated through the cross of Jesus. If interpreters turn "born again" into a slogan, they domesticate the radical newness of Jesus' words and diminish the good news. (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.IX, Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1995, p. 555, emphasis in original.)

"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," said Jesus. (3:8) What kind of fiery transformation we may experience, whether a spontaneous combustion or a slow smoulder,

isn't up to us; it's up the Spirit who does what she chooses.

So, "let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire."

(Hebrews 12:28-29)

Amen.