

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – May 27, 2018

[John 3:1-17](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on John 3:1-17 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “What Is a Second Life?” – June 7, 2009)

This gospel lection presents what has certainly become one of the most familiar stories about Jesus within contemporary American Christianity. Its climactic verse, John 3:16, has been waved at sporting and other major public events for decades to the point that in the mid-1990s the reference was parodied by a professional wrestler. The passage even gave to popular culture a designation for a particular understanding of being a follower of Christ, namely the “born-again Christian” (see 3:3, 7 in KJV, NIV and others).

But familiarity with the basics of the story does not always equate with understanding the ways in which it represents key aspects of how the Fourth Gospel accomplishes its theological work. The evangelist has related the story about the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus with layers of allusions to other parts of this gospel and interacting meanings triggered by different uses of words within the language. Indeed, the very designation “born again” is drawn from one of the prime examples of this evangelist’s use of that technique. Lest we get ahead of ourselves, however, it is best to begin at the beginning.

The story opens with the statement that Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night” (3:2, NRSV). This detail of setting does more than just add vividness to the narration; it associates Nicodemus with the “darkness [which] did not overcome” the Word/Jesus (1:5). But the word translated “overcome” (*καταλαμβανω*) can also be used in the sense of “to understand.” We should not be surprised, then, that as the story unfolds Nicodemus fails to understand what it is that Jesus shares with him, and precisely so because he latches on to particular uses of words that prove to be other than what Jesus primarily intends.

Nevertheless, things seem to start off on the right foot. Nicodemus begins by correctly recognizing Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God” (as Jesus himself later affirms; see v. 13) on the basis of the “signs” which he has performed that demonstrate “the presence of God” with him. Jesus responds by commending him for this recognition — that he can “see” the signs as evidence of “the kingdom of God” — and indicates this insight has only been possible because he has been “born [*ανωθεν*].” Now, there really is no way to understand how this story progresses from this point without knowing that Greek word. It has two quite distinct uses: either “again” (NIV; NRSV margin) or “from above” (NRSV; NIV margin). The issue, then, is how is Jesus using it here?

Nicodemus reacts to Jesus’ statement somewhat incredulously by asking how anyone could re-enter “the mother’s womb and be born” (the question is phrased in such a way in Greek to indicate the speaker expects a negative response). Clearly, then, he has understood both *ανωθεν* to mean “again” and Jesus as speaking in physical (perhaps we should say, in view of v. 12, “earthly”) terms. His assumptions in this regard are wrong on both counts.

Jesus seeks to correct Nicodemus' misunderstanding by reminding him that "[w]hat is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit"; that is to say, there is both a physical reality to things and a spiritual reality to them. In keeping with a dominant and static metaphor, the realm of the Spirit can be spoken of as being "above" (see v. 13 again). Thus, Jesus here primarily uses *ανωθεν* in the sense of "from above" to indicate those born not only into life in the physical realm but also attuned to the activity of the Spirit — yet another word play, since both "wind" and "Spirit" in verse 8 are the same Greek word, *πνευμα*. These are the ones who can "see" physical manifestations, "signs," also as spiritual revelations that "the kingdom of God" is present, just as they are also able to properly discern when *πνευμα* means "wind" and when it means "spirit," and when *ανωθεν* means "again" and when it means "from above." If Nicodemus has truly seen the "signs" as proof of God's presence, then he should "not be astonished" by any statement about the need to be "born from above" (v. 7).

Yet Nicodemus continues to be astonished ("How can these things be?" v. 9), which triggers its own astonished answer from Jesus: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" (NRSV; "know these things" is perhaps a better translation given John 1:5, since the word here in 3:10 is *γινωσκω*). Nicodemus still cannot "receive" (*λαμβανω*, the root word on which *καταλαμβανω* in 1:5 is based) what Jesus is telling him, even though Jesus has continued to couch it in the dual physical/spiritual imagery of "signs" by using "earthly things" to describe "heavenly things" (v. 12). Perhaps, then, he had not really understood the "signs" themselves in the first place. Maybe he had recognized them (only) as manifestations of divine power and not (also) as indications of the presence of God's kingdom (as Jesus' initial response to his statement had assumed).

As if all these layers of physical and spiritual meanings weren't already enough, the evangelist has by this point overlaid yet another layer in his telling of the story. No longer is this just an exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus; both of them have become representative figures of all who are either (only) "born of the flesh" or (also) "born of the Spirit" respectively. This layer first appeared in verse 7, where the "you" who "must be born from above" is actually a "y'all" (that is, second person *plural*, *υμας*; so also in vv. 11-12), and it appears again in verse 11 where Jesus uses both the first person singular and plural ("I tell you, we speak ...", [*italics added*]).

This additional layer of meaning produces real difficulties for editors of "red letter edition" Bibles who struggle to know when Jesus stops speaking to Nicodemus and the evangelist begins his commentary for the readers on their exchange. There were, of course, no quotation marks in the earliest Greek manuscripts. Some present Jesus as speaking all the way until verse 22 ("After this Jesus and his disciples went. ..."); some end his speech with verse 15; and others choose various points in between. Whether Jesus or the evangelist 'speaks' the famous words of John 3:16-17 is ultimately a distinction without a difference. God sent the Son down into the world not to condemn Nicodemus and all those like him, but to midwife them through birth "from above" by the Spirit so that they could truly see the "signs" of evidence that God is with us.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out another commentary available for this text (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading this passage?