

# Born From Above

Second Sunday in Lent  
St. John 3:1-17  
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It was nighttime in Jerusalem. Light from oil lamps flickered in open windows. Through the darkened streets, a lone figure hurried along, hoping not to draw attention to himself. He was a member of the Pharisees – a sect of the Jews who were purists about the law and strictly interpreted it to the point of being intolerant of others. But this Pharisee named Nicodemus had heard about Jesus – or perhaps he had heard him teach – and something deep inside him stirred.

When Nicodemus finally met up with Jesus, he spoke respectfully: **“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.”** Nicodemus hadn’t come to flatter Jesus or pay him a compliment. No, he sees the presence of God in Jesus but doesn’t know what to make of it.

And then, Jesus puts him on his heels: **“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”** Nicodemus is stunned. **“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”** Jesus puts it to him plainly: **“No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”** **“How can these things be?”** replies the perplexed Pharisee. Nicodemus is still in the dark.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was a professor of history and founder of the Institute for Women’s Studies at Emory University, the first women’s studies program in the United States. A brilliant academician, she had always considered herself to be a Christian **“in the amorphous cultural sense of the word.”** By the time she had completed college and then

graduate school, she said, **“I had so thoroughly imbibed materialist philosophy that it did not occur to me to look beyond it. My quests, such as they were, focused upon the claims and contours of moral worthiness in a world that took it as a matter of faith that God is dead.”**

Fox-Genovese couldn't see because belief for her had more to do with right behavior rather than being right with God. Nicodemus couldn't see because the spiritual truth Jesus proclaimed didn't match with his idea of a rational, reasonable faith. Neither Nicodemus nor Fox-Genovese's attitudes should surprise us.

Whether an academic intellectual, a work-a-day employee, a struggling student or someone trying to figure out what's golden about retirement, each of us can get lost in the dark. We can decide that we'll relate to God on our terms – and assume He'll agree with it. We can decide to set our own course in life – apart from seeking God and His kingdom first – and then wonder why God seems to be so distant from us, so shrouded in darkness. The fact is, that distance is actually separation. And isn't separation from God the basic meaning of sin: living apart from God, doing your own thing?

Just as Nicodemus couldn't understand what Jesus was saying, Fox-Genovese's encounter with a Jewish teacher resulted in a similar lack of understanding. **“When I was twenty,” she said, “André Amar, a brilliant professor of philosophy and a devout Jew, had spoken to me of religion as a realm unto itself, irreducible to any other, and his words had lodged in my mind, but I did not fully understand them.”**

She hadn't figured out why his words haunted her, but they did. Something was missing in her life, but she couldn't figure out what it was or how to fix it.

When I was working at The Wichita Eagle, an editor asked if she could have lunch with me to talk about something personal in her life. Most people in the newsroom knew I had been a pastor. When we met at a local restaurant, she told me how she struggles with belief in God. Her personal

problems had driven a wedge between her and belief. We met for lunch perhaps two or three additional times. She would pepper me with questions – I would do the best I could to answer them. A couple months later, she left The Eagle to take a job at another newspaper. I never knew whether our conversations shed light on the troubling questions she asked.

Nicodemus was struggling to understand what Jesus was saying. **“How can anyone be born after having grown old?”** he asked. It doesn't make sense. **“Are you a teacher of Israel and yet don't understand these things?”** Jesus replied. Spiritual rebirth is not your own doing. Of course you can't be born anew on your own, Jesus tells him. No one can. Neither could your ancestors who were facing poisonous snakes in the wilderness. Remember the story?

Bitten by snakes for their rebelliousness during the Exodus, the Israelites could be healed only by gazing at the pole that Moses had erected in their camp – a pole with a bronze serpent on it. For you, Nicodemus – and all of us who follow him – it takes the Son of Man himself being lifted up on the cross to heal you. What saves you is something that you cannot do yourself. The Son of Man has come to accomplish it **for** you and **in** you. That is how you are to be born from above. Jesus says in effect: **“I will go through the death for you. In my hands you will be born of water and Spirit, and you will see the kingdom of heaven.”**

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese eventually came to understand that truth about Jesus and his kingdom. **“It took two or three years for me to begin to understand that the decisive action had not been mine but God's,” she wrote. “In principle, we all know that faith is a gift or grace, not a personal accomplishment. But if my case is as common as I suspect it is, we find that knowledge surprisingly difficult to believe and make fully ours. Thus, with the best of intentions, we try to earn that which lies beyond the reach of even our most heroic efforts and which exceeds any merit we can conceive.”**

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese died in 2007, 12 years after her conversion and entrance into the Catholic Church.

Fox-Genovese learned the lesson of grace. So did Nicodemus. We read later in John's Gospel that Nicodemus defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin. After Jesus' crucifixion, we read that Nicodemus came bearing spices to assist Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus. What had both Nicodemus and Fox-Genovese come to understand? The same lesson Jesus continues to proclaim to you and to me: **"Stop TRYING to believe in me! Instead, surrender yourself to me. Let my Holy Spirit take hold of you. Trust me to teach you to believe."**

Such thinking goes contrary to popular opinion. Belief, many people assume, is purely human initiative: I decide to believe. The idea that the object of our belief should give birth to our belief within us is scandalous. Yet, that is what our Lord Jesus does.

He makes us children of God in our baptism. He assures us of our kinship to Christ through his Word and his Sacraments. He promises us that nothing will ever separate us from his love, not even death itself. He creates, sustains, and renews our faith every day – no matter what our feelings, our doubts, or our despairing thoughts may tell us. **He** takes the action because of His inexhaustible mercy and grace.

If there is anything for us to **DO**, it is to focus on Christ, to commune with him so that the Spirit can lead us. That's what Lent is teaching us, that's why we follow Lenten disciplines and seek ways to nurture our faith. Because the truth is: We are not in darkness. Christ's light has come. It has overcome the darkness in each of us – in you and in me – and we are His, now and forever. Amen.