



I love a good recommendation.

 Could be for a good book
 or a place where the burgers are perfect
 or even a new series on Netflix.

There's a new Facebook feature

 where you can get recommendations
 for almost anything;
 the right dentist,
 where to get the best oil change
 for your money and time;
 who cleans carpets
 or even where to buy the best lasagna
 —Liazzo's, we all know that.

I haven't tried the recommendation thing yet,
 has anyone in here?

Maybe I haven't tried it

 because I tend to ask
 the people I know the best, first.
 We need a new roof, who did you use?
 I don't like chain pharmacies, where do you go?
 I want a really good cheese burger...anyone, anyone?

If we start with the people we know,

 it's a good idea to ask Jeff Mitchell
 and Gene Glaze about roofers;
 talk to Bill Pitts or Katie Teague
 about the pharmacy;
 and there isn't a doubt in my mind
 that Mark Huckabee can give you
 the best place for a cheeseburger
 in any of our surrounding counties.

We ask the people we know

 because then usually the recommendation
 matches the expectation.

But not always.
When Publix finally opened up,
there was so much buzz around a grocery store!
They'd carry your groceries to your car;
you've got to try their pre-made
or made-to-order sandwiches;
and don't even get started on the samples.
There was so much talk about Publix
I made up my mind I needed to go.
Good customer service?
Good selection of food?
Balloons for my girls?
—let's go see what this is all about.
But I'll be honest,
my expectations weren't met.
Now all of you may not agree with me on this,
but I just wasn't that impressed.
My expectations had grown so large
that I was disappointed
when the store wasn't what I'd hoped for.



Nicodemus had heard a lot and seen a thing or two
as it related to this Jesus from Nazareth.
And perhaps based on his own personal experience,
Nicodemus has certain expectations about Christ.
He's a Pharisee after all,
and they certainly have expectations
about the coming messiah.
So certain are they about who the messiah will be,
and what the messiah will do,
that when he is living and walking among them,
they are blinded by their own faithful,
misguided expectations.

So what happens

when our expectations aren't met?
And not about grocery stores
but about the big stuff,
the stuff that really matters?

Or what happens

when our expectations aren't just not met
but broken?

During the day I think Nicodemus,
is probably just trying to be normal.

But it seems everywhere he turns,
there's a reminder that something has
changed.

Someone has caused a ripple
in the fabric of what Nicodemus knows to be true.

So that even when he goes to the market to get his olives
he's hearing the store owner

talking to her friend the next booth over,
"That Jesus turned the water
at the Rachel's and Reuben's wedding
into wine!"

That would have caught Nicodemus's attention.

"And it was the best wine
any of us had ever tasted!"

A messiah who goes to weddings
and does party tricks?

He leans in feigning interest in the figs

even though he's got a full jar of them at home:

"And not only that," he hears,

"but apparently crazy-long-haired John likes him.

And John doesn't like anybody," the women chatter.

Surely as the buzz about Jesus goes around town,

Nicodemus and the other leaders of Israel
are more both curious and fearful.

Better not show it, however.

No, '*maintain the look of disinterest*,' he tells himself

as he politely pays for the olives
and quickly heads back to the Temple.

We know how to wear that mask too, don't we?

The one that says,
on the outside everything is fine;
but inside I'm not so sure.

Or during the day things are fine,
but at night I can't sleep.

For Nicodemus this Jesus is the same Jesus,
who just days before
had caused a quite a stir at the Temple.
Nicodemus had seen the whole scene unfold;
Jesus came in with some ratty fishermen disciples,
took a look around and went
berserk.

He got out a whip and chased all the animals out;
he picked up the money and threw it everywhere
and he'd gone from table to table
throwing them over on their sides.

Most of the Pharisee's were too stunned to do anything.
And when they finally came to
and asked him by what right and authority
did he come in here and reek this kind of havoc,
his answer really made no sense
—*I will destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up*—
it really just made Nicodemus
all the more anxious.

It messed with his expectations.



During the day, he was fine.
But at night it was a different story.
There was this nagging at him
so that he couldn't even sleep.

It's like when you try to close your eyes at night,
but you see every passing headlight on the ceiling;
you the hear the train whistle every hour-
every time the dog moves—for goodness sake,
can't she settle down!

Lying awake in your bed unable to turn your mind off.

You know what I mean? This is Nicodemus.

Barbara Brown Taylor

—you all know my affinity for her—writes,
“A bed...is where you face your nearness to
or farness from God.

Whether you are in pain or in sorrow,
whether you are an anxious person or not
—even I think whether you are a religious person or not—
a bed where you come face to face
with what really matters
because it is too dark
for most of your usual, shallowing distractions to work.

You can turn on the lights if you want,
but they are all artificial.
The most they can do
is postpone your encounter
with what really matters.
They cannot save you from that reckoning forever.”¹

This teetering on the edge of what really matters
is what I suppose kept Nicodemus up.
Something is pulling
at the edges of his faith
and therefore his very heart,
lurking and waiting for the dark to settle
so that it can rush in like the wind,
and shatter Nicodemus's truth.

This is why Nicodemus is awake in the dark.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, Learning to Walk in the Dark HarperOne, 2014. Pg. 76

Now I don't know about you,
but when Barbra Brown Taylor writes
that if **you** in your tossing and turning,
when something is nagging at the edges of your faith
and therefore your heart
and you are tempted to turn on your lights at night
to give you peace;
when she writes that the best those lights can do
is postpone your encounter with what really matters,
that the lights are only artificial
and you won't be able to stave off that reckoning,
that nearness to
or farness from God;
I sort of shudder.



I can enter the story of Nicodemus.
Because I too have wanted to turn on those lights
and be done with the unease;
I've not wanted to wrestle with God;
I haven't wanted my expectations to be destroyed.

But that is exactly what Jesus does to Nicodemus.
You might have expectations
about who I am and what God is,
but I'm here to challenge that,
Jesus tells him.

Here's what I have to tell you;
You've been tossing and turning,
but here's what will bring you peace
and a nearness to God's kingdom:
Be born from above.
Be born into God.

When it comes to believing,
we've gotten too comfortable
with the black and white
and the hard and the concrete.
I think Israel was there at one time too.
Israel had the clear rules
about who was in and who was out,
who was saved and who was not.
Laws about how to worship
and how not to worship.

And then Jesus comes along.
Jesus who is acting a lot like God,
but at the same time
not acting like our picture of God.
He's healing a lot like God,
but not.
He's teaching and talking a lot like God,
but not.

Good theology,
that is good talk about God,
Karl Barth says goes like this,
God is a no that breaks into all of our yes.²
Meaning that whatever our expectations are
about the divine,
God might shatter.

Irish theologian Peter Rollins explains,
"we create kingdoms and God is that
which breaks the kingdoms apart.
When God shows up,
everything we thought we knew is dust and ash."³

Be born from above.
When God shows up,
everything we thought we knew
is dust and ash.

² Rob Bell & Peter Rollins, <https://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-111-pete-rollins-on-god-part-1/>

³ *ibid*

Of course Nicodemus is troubled.

Of course he is restless at night.

Of course he isn't ready to hear these things,
at least not right away.

We aren't ready either.

We hear this and we think we get it.

We hear this and we too with Nicodemus say,

*"oh okay when you say be born from above
you mean be born again!*

Right, be born again, I get Jesus

—come and live in my heart

and I will be changed.

Born again."

But that's not what Jesus said.

Nicodemus is still holding onto
something he can know.

But changing *born from above* to *born again*,
even that understanding takes God
and puts God in a box,

we can negate being born again!

How can someone enter the womb a second time!

Being born again,

sounds a lot like individual salvation.

It looks a lot like all we need to do

is accept Christ into our lives

and then it is done.



Too often when we talk about God,

it is just a larger projection of ourselves.

Barth says, it's like when we talk about God,
 we talk about ourselves with a megaphone.⁴
 This is what got Israel into trouble.
 All those years later,
 after encountering the God of the cosmos
 on a mountain in the wilderness,
 Israel adds law upon law,
 rule upon rule,
 restriction upon restriction
 and claims this is who God is.

Doesn't that sound familiar?
 God can't be okay with this person
 and that person
 or this way doing things
 and that way of doing things
 ...we are guilty too.

It is hard to grasp that God
 is not a projection of ourselves,
 but actually *the projectile*.
 Perhaps we could even say the reverse,
 God is the yes that breaks into all of our no
 — God is the projectile that shatters our expectations;
 which means God looks an awful lot
 like this is Jesus the Christ...

I think it is the Spirit of God
 that is nagging at Nicodemus
 in his bed every night
 until he finally gets up and has to find Jesus
 —he has to have his reckoning.

Tell me, Jesus, tell me what I can't bear to hear
 —*that the truth is,*
 “To be born [from above] means
 to breathe in the Holy Spirit,
 to begin a lifetime of ingesting and processing grace.
 Our birth and our re-birth
 are not random events.

⁴ *ibid*

They are carefully crafted components
of God's plan for Creation.
And as such they involve God in totality:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit."⁵

Peter Rollins says, "God is an event,
not a fact to be grasped
but an incoming to be undergone."⁶
This is what it means to,
Be born from above.

God is an event to undergo
—a projectile that shatters our expectations.
That, I think is what Jesus
wants Nicodemus to see.
You call yourself a teacher of Israel,
yet you do not understand.

Being born from above
means being willing
to go back to the original creation,
the original intent for this world
—where the Spirit hovered over the waters.
Where it wasn't about believing
with just our head.
It wasn't about faith as intellectual pursuit.
It wasn't about finding proof using the empirical data.
"It is not about getting the right belief.
It is about a different way of life.
the truth is not in what I think
but in what I do."⁷

Being born from above
is willingly letting go
of expectations about who God is
and what God does
and who God loves and favors;

⁵ Rev. David F. Sellery

<http://us6.campaignarchive1.com/?u=dbffd2070718c7bb6a1b9b7e0&id=2070982f49&e=9d753c1a09>

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* HarperOne, 2014

⁷ Rob Bell & Peter Rollins, <https://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-111-pete-rollins-on-god-part-1/>

for God so loved the world..., right?
Being born from above
means we stop trying to control and predict God
and instead become a people
who are invited to participate
in the reality that transforms us.

“You know well enough
how the wind blows this way and that.
You hear it rustling through the trees,
but you have no idea where it comes from
or where it’s headed next.
That’s the way it is with everyone
‘born from above’ by the wind of God,
the Spirit of God.”

It is letting yourself be swept up into
the event that is God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
The event,
the ongoing event of God.

So when the Spirit comes to your bedside,
pleading, urging, waking you from distraction
—what will you do?
Will you turn on the lights?
Or are you willing to encounter
what really matters
are you willing to have your expectations smashed?

Friends faith at its best
is about orienting yourself differently in the world
not having a certain view about the world.

Are you ready to be born from above?

In the name of one in three
and three in one,
who shatters and awakens and calls,
Amen.