

A Terrible Freedom



Nicodemus lay in bed before sunrise awakened by wind, thinking about his visit with the Nazarene last night, a visit he had no business making, even under cover of night and a hood so he wouldn't be spotted by the other doctors of religion. They too, he knew, were fascinated by the peasant from north of nowhere. But they had dismissed him. A quack, a charlatan, another messianic pretender. How could they, he asked himself, dismiss the

healings, the flow of wisdom, the spiritual authority of his teachings?

He knew why already. He broke laws, he challenged tradition, and he had a knowing that was not hearsay. Most of all he showed little respect for their office, their status among the people. He saw into their souls and this, above all, they could not tolerate. They wouldn't hear him because they couldn't hear him without going through the turmoil Nicodemus was undergoing.

Nicodemus saw the wind move the curtain beside the bed, listening to the breathing of his beloved sleeping wife. How did the Nazarene put it?

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.

A longing surged inside Nicodemus. He remembered his youth when he would run through the wheat fields with the local dogs trailing in behind him. He would lie on his back with the dogs licking his face, and wonder at what must lie beyond the blue

dome. He wanted it all. He felt life with an immediacy that made him feel like he was going to explode. Yes, it was freedom he longed for. The freedom to follow the wind wherever it blows. The freedom to not know. The freedom to follow a hunch, to stake your life on it.

This Nazarene moved like the wind. He was nobody's slave, but everybody's servant. He never seemed to need to think about what he was going to say before he said it. And when he spoke, it was like thunder. His voice was the promise a great relief that coming soon, like the spring rains. When it was time to move on, he moved on. When it was time to stop, he stopped. Nothing seemed to be in the way of his listening for the promptings of Spirit. What does he know that I don't? From whence this freedom? How did he never lose it?

The wind was not always gentle though was it, he mused. It "breaks the cedars, the cedars of Lebanon, and strips the forests bare. It causes oaks to whirl". He had just sung this psalm in the synagogue. We sing these words, he realized, but we don't hear them, or they would tear us up by the roots.



Who could he talk to about all he was going through? But there was nobody who could really hear him, who wouldn't just try to settle him down. Now he knew why he risked everything to talk to the peasant mystic. He felt a moment of shame that he framed the whole thing as a theological debate, when really what he wanted to ask was, "Who are you? How do you live like you do? From whence your power and wisdom? What do you see?"

Why can't I see it? What must I do to see like this?"

How did he put it?

"Unless you are born from above, nobody can see the Kingdom of God".

This being "born from above" had something to do with letting go of everything that everybody else thought was important. It meant letting go of his carefully constructed beliefs, and the theological acumen for which he was known and honoured. Oye, it meant more than this. A moment of terror seized him, when the thought came: "Being born from above means first and foremost letting go of Nicodemus—let go of Nicodemus and everything else will come to you." The mantra repeated itself over and over again. The bed felt like it was spinning. Was he losing his mind?

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

The words were a torment, a torrent that was sweeping him away. Everything he associated with "Nicodemus" he understood was "born of the flesh" and whatever else Jesus was doing, he was reaching into his soul for the Nicodemus of the wheat fields, for the him that was born of the Spirit. It was excruciating, this truth that he knew, and did not have the courage to live.

He reviewed his life, a life he had come to love. Too much maybe? A good life by anybody's standards. But at what point did the good become the enemy of the better? Recently he had grown restless. His wife was beginning to worry about him. He had grown impatient with the endless theological debates. What once fascinated him, now just hurt his head. The prayers seemed empty. The rituals seemed to be more of a safeguard against God than a way to connect. He would stare off blankly

until his wife called him back.



Maybe his restlessness was a sign that Spirit was blowing him off centre? Maybe *he* was the cedar of Lebanon in need of being broken and stripped bare by the fierce mercy of the wind. He was the mighty oak who wanted in his soul at least, to be picked up and whirled out of his mind and into submission, by a force stronger than his fear of movement. He hated these thoughts. But he felt alive. He could not deny it.

By the time breakfast was finished, the pattern was established that he would forget these thoughts. A necessary amnesia. He knew because this had been going on every morning for the past couple of years—ever since he caught wind of Jesus. He knew that his wife would make breakfast and serve him. She would tousle his hair as she walked by, and his children would be running around the house. He would leave to gather with his minion for morning prayers. His prayers would help to calm the storm. He would look around at his friends who had celebrated and supported him over the years, and he would reassure himself that this was his life.

He did not understand the tears streaming down his face after these reassuring thoughts came to him. Or why he got up quietly to close all the windows. It seemed now preposterous to him that after his campfire meeting with Jesus that he had thought for just a minute that all things were possible, that he could persuade his wife to follow him, this nomad of the north. He felt free. God, he felt free. For just a moment, he had felt the wind at his back. He wiped the tears away before his wife could see.

John 3:1-17

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

3:2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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."

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

3:4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

3:8 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."

3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

3:11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.

3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who

descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

3:17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Psalm 29

29:1 Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

29:2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.

29:3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.

29:4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

29:5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

29:6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

29:7 The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

29:8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

29:9 The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

29:10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

29:11 May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

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