

A Good Question is Hard to Find [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
John 3:1—17; Numbers 21:4—9

Question: *Is every question a good question?* Now *THAT*, in and of itself, is a good question.

And I'm going to venture an answer. Not every question *is* a good question. For example, if we happen to be talking about Israel's hope for Messiah or the Salvaging of Human History, a question that boils down to '*What's In This For Me?*' is not a very good question. But maybe it's a place to start. Let's hope so.

Tony Campolo once told the story of a self-identified 'Born-Again' preacher who had been invited to speak at a local prison. Those who gathered to hear her had been required to be there by the warden, who wasn't very happy in his job of overseeing the rehabilitation of criminals. Most of the inmates, of course, came from broken families; they were addicts, suffering from deep depression; they were the abused and consequently became abusers themselves. And so, when the preacher arrived late, she didn't have time to read the room; and she immediately, in a very light-hearted tone of voice, told the prisoners why she had been late. She said, '*On my way over here, a huge semi-truck kicked up a stone that cracked the windshield of my sports car. I'm late because I immediately pulled over and placed my finger on the hole in the center of the shattered glass; and I prayed that God would heal my windshield...*' Everyone looked at her and rolled their eyes. Others folded their tattooed bare arms over their chests. And then, she asked a question: "*Would you believe me if I told you that God healed my car?*" And, as if they had planned it, all in unison, offered this reply: "**NO!**" Questions matter. Maybe more than their answers, they matter.

Nicodemus is identified in John's Gospel as *"a Pharisee"* and *"a leader of the Jews"* and *"a teacher of Israel"*—which means he's probably very capable of asking a good question. And yet, as he approaches Jesus under cover of darkness, it's unclear he knows what to ask: *"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."* Now that doesn't sound like a question; it sounds more like flattery. And if there are any conspiracy-mongers lurking in the night, it sounds a little bit like collusion. It sounds as if Nicodemus may be setting Jesus up for a covert political alliance; and without a doubt, any Messianic figure would have benefited from such an arrangement. It would be like Cathy McMorris Rogers inviting someone at Northwood Presbyterian to the National Prayer Breakfast. Just think how an endorsement—even a behind-the-scenes endorsement like that—would help grease the wheels.

But wait! It turns out that Jesus doesn't play those games. He doesn't pander and he doesn't position himself as someone who aspires to climb the social ladder. He doesn't need to be recognized as person of authority. He just *is*. And therefore, not being in need of the public affirmation that comes with nepotism, Jesus responds to Nicodemus with a statement that's sure to provoke a question. And the question is—WILL IT BE A GOOD QUESTION? Jesus says: *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."*

So now—what does someone like Nicodemus say?

What do we say?

Well one option is to take things literally. When our first son, Ian, was born, Sheryl had already gone past the due-date by two weeks, and she kept getting bigger and bigger. Then, after going to the doctor's office, and watching the doctor examine her, he said, *'Well, I'd like you to go the hospital right now.'* And in a state of shock, I literally said, *'Where's the hospital?'* Which prompted him to pull the literal blinds in his office and literally point to the building across the street. And he said, *'You see that building. I'll meet you over there.'* It was quite a moment; and I was grateful that he took my question so literally. (Imagine, just for kicks, if our gynecologist had responded by saying, *'Scott, Jesus is your hospital and your doctor; and he'll provide all the painkillers and the inducements to labor that Sheryl needs.'* That would have been a disaster.) So, being literal about literal things is not necessarily bad.

And yet, given how Jesus mentions the **KINGDOM OF GOD** in nearly the same breath as he mentions being **BORN FROM ABOVE**, the next question out of the Pharisee's mouth is a bust, and not very good. ***"He 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?'"*** So where are we? Are we literally stuck in literal words? Or might the words that we use—or might the questions we ask—become the friction of a launching-off-point. I've seen the Olympic competition—(I think it's the Long Jump)—where the athlete gets a running start and after a series of rapid strides, plants her foot in the ground and launches herself against the forces of gravity into the air. Jesus, it seems to me, prompts Nicodemus to do this same thing with his words. And yes, like a good coach or a midwife, he's pressing: ***"If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"***

So go ahead. Take a flying leap from the literal words into the realm of Spirit. Pivot and use the torque of human experience as a launching-off point. Everyone that exists has gone through the water of the womb. We all gestate and when the water breaks, you and I and Nicodemus are born. Birth is passive. We didn't choose it. A mother's body goes through contractions. She is in labor. She breathes and she pushes. And we are born. So now that you have that literal image in your mind's eye, take the leap: ALL OF CREATION IS THE WOMB. THE SPIRIT IS HOVERING OVER THE WATERS. HERE IS THE TIME OF GESTATION:

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’”

Well, I'm sorry Jesus: I'm still slightly astonished. Are you going to do anything about that crack in my windshield? And how about the weather? United Airlines keeps delaying my flight to Hawaii and the F.A.A. says the typhoon's an 'Act of God.' Can you do anything about that?

Jesus, will you answer my question? And listen to what he says:

“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.”

You see, no matter the question, Jesus is angling for the transcendent. There is no literal guarantee of safety and security. There is no literal entitlement to luxury and pleasure. There is no literal escape hatch into the sky. There is birth and there is wind. And now, leap. Leap from the literal experience of a world that so easily condemns itself to a world that God “so” loves. Can you believe it? Can I believe it? Nicodemus, like us, still has a question. He says in verse nine: ***“How can these things be?”***

Now, let me offer this reassurance: *incredulity* or *unbelief* is not a bad place to start. Mary, the mother of Jesus, has a question that's similar to that of Nicodemus when the Angel informs her of becoming literally pregnant. In Luke, chapter one, she says, "***How can this be?***" Moreover, in Mark 9:24, the disciples say, "***Lord I believe; help my unbelief.***" And, in Matthew 7:7—9, Jesus exhorts his followers ***to ask, to knock on the door*** (which is not so literal) and ***to search***. The problem, however, is when we settle for the search being over—when there's an easy, pie-in-the-sky answer... For instance, when my mother taught me to pray—'*Now, I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take*'—she was doing her best. But is that it? I doubt it. And, as the years go by, I think Jesus wants all of us to doubt it. To everyone, including Nicodemus, who aspires to "***ascend***" into heaven, he has this to say: "***No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.***"

James Loder had been on vacation with his family, driving north into Canada. A woman stood on the shoulder of the highway, hopelessly staring at her flat tire. Wanting to help, the man who later became my teacher at seminary, pulled over to see what he could do. What happened next utterly transformed his life. Picture him beneath the fender of the car, fighting with the lug-nuts, when another driver, falling asleep at the wheel, veers into both vehicles and pins Loder beneath the wreckage. And then:

"As I roused myself under the car, a steady surge of life was rushing through me. I never felt more conscious of the life that poured through me, nor more aware that this life was not my own. My well-being came from beyond my natural strength. By far, the most significant and memorable effect was not the pain, nor the anger, but the gracious nature of the life I was experiencing..." [*The Transforming Moment*].

You see, accidents like these are our first clue: *'Eternal Life'* doesn't just start when an individual dies and flutters off to heaven. It doesn't even start. It doesn't even end. In Loder's book, *The Transforming Moment*, he describes the experience as one of *descent*. Something *descends* into him, something from above: *the Life that Was and Is and Always Will Be*. Fire trucks and EMT's and ambulances arrive. There's a rush through traffic to the hospital and an emergency operation. But from that moment on, Loder refuses to look away—and he continues to intensify his gaze at that accidental affliction. What did it mean? What *does* it mean?

Good question, right? Unfortunately, today's gospel reading has been so coopted by American Culture that a question like that is reduced and redacted. After seeing John 3:16 hoisted on signs in the end-zones, between the uprights, after every touchdown scored by every football team in the NFL, we begin to assume the answers that we ought *not* to assume. We check the box marked *'Going to Heaven When I Die'* and then get on with our literal lives as if there's nothing more at stake. But what's at stake is the One who has ***"descended from heaven"***—and every moment of every day and night, when there is suffering and affliction, it's possible, even probable, that he's there. Look at him.

Look at Jesus, not avoiding the literal stuff that we go through, but becoming fully accessible to us IN THE VERY QUESTIONS WE MIGHT ASK. And here's another one: ***"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."*** What's this about?

Last week, of course, we heard about the crafty and deceptive snake in the Garden of Eden. But what's this about? Let's not assume that we know the answer. According to the Book of Numbers, chapter 21, the people of Israel are so tired of wandering around the Sinai Peninsula that they begin to complain. They complain that there's no food and no drink—and then groan, ***“we detest this miserable food,”*** which should tell us something about their collective state of mind. Poisonous snakes then enter the picture and people die. And so, after expressing their sadness, regret and remorse, the survivors approach Moses for a solution. God instructs Moses to create a bronze serpent and wrap it around a pole: ***“and whenever a [literal] serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live”*** [v. 9]. Hmmm. Any questions?

Look! And don't look away! To make snake anti-venom, I'm told, pharmaceutical researchers milk the actual deadly stuff from the poisonous serpents and then inject it into the bloodstreams of large mammals like sheep and horses. Then, as the anti-bodies form in those animals, they extract the blood and refine it.* That's how it works. The very thing that has the potential to cause death is used to heal and give life. So now—let's make the leap. Whether Nicodemus knows it or not, there's poison in the politics of Rome and there's poison in the way the Pharisees have compartmentalized their religious devotion. That's the venom. And is there any chance that venom is still poisoning our relationships today? And could it be that Jesus has already provided the anti-venom? Might it be in his body and in his blood? And if we eat his body and drink his blood, might the anti-venom be activated in us?

*Huffington Post: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/key-snake-anti-venom-is-running-out-doctors-without-borders-warns_n_55ef326ae4b03784e276c941