

*The belonging you seek is not behind you – it is ahead.*

It would appear that the quote from biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan didn't apply to Nicodemus. Crossan famously said, "My point . . . is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally."

Nicodemus took Jesus literally. When Jesus said, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," Nicodemus is stunned. He thinks Jesus means he has to somehow get back into his mother's womb. Imagine what he must have been thinking. Here was this teacher everyone was raving about, the one he - a Pharisee - had sneaked out to see. It was no small risk; as a member of the religious establishment, being affiliated with this rabble-rouser could have been seen as an act of rebellion against the empire.

So he comes to see Jesus under cover of darkness. And what does he get? This guy Jesus spouting some nonsense about being born again. We're used to hearing that phrase; we have our own reactions when we hear it. We have to put ourselves in Nicodemus' sandals to hear his bewilderment. Nicodemus thought that Jesus was telling him that in order to be part of the realm of God he needed to go back to the beginning, back to where he had come from. But that's not what Jesus meant. Let's watch a clip from *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens*. Listen for what Rey thinks she needs to do and for the advice given to her by the ancient, wise Maz Kanata. *Watch clip*

Jesus couldn't have said it better himself: "The belonging you seek is not behind you – it is ahead." Not that we don't remember and honor the past. Knowing from whence we've come is an important part of understanding ourselves. But we can't stay or go back there, as much as we might be tempted or as much as we long for a time gone by.

In his classic book, *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler identified seven stages of development in our spiritual lives. Unfortunately, it's been widely accepted that one of these stages is where many people remain their entire lives. See if you can guess which one.

Stage 1 (birth-2) is characterized by learning the safety of our environment. If we experience consistent nurture, we develop a sense of trust about the universe and the divine. Conversely, if we don't receive consistent nurturing, the opposite will be true.

The next stage is the stage of preschool children in which fantasy and reality often get mixed together. Our most basic ideas about God are usually picked up from our parents and/or society. Then, when we become school age, we start understanding the world in more logical ways. We generally accept the stories told by our faith community but tend to understand them in very literal ways. We have a strong belief in the justice and reciprocity of the universe, and our images of God are almost always anthropomorphic (with human form and/or human qualities).

Then comes adolescence, characterized by conformity to authority and the development of our religious identity. At this stage, we tend to have a hard time seeing outside our religious box and don't even recognize that we're inside a belief system. We rely on some sort of institution (such as a church) to give us stability. We become attached to the forms of our religion and get extremely upset when these are called into question.

The next stage, often begun in young adulthood, is a time of angst and struggle. We start seeing outside the box and realizing that there are other boxes. We begin to critically examine our beliefs and often become disillusioned with our faith. Ironically, people in the stage before this one usually think that those in this stage have become "backsliders" when actually they've moved forward. This stage can end up being very non-religious and some people stay in it permanently.

It's rare for people to reach this next stage before mid-life. This is when we begin to realize the limits of logic and start to accept the paradoxes in life. We begin to see life as a mystery and often return to sacred stories and symbols but this time without being stuck in a theological box. The last stage is often called a "universalizing" or "mystical" faith. Few of us ever get there. Those who do live their lives to the full in service of others without any real worries or doubts. People who reach this stage start to realize that there is truth to be found in both the previous two stages and that life can be paradoxical and full of mystery. Emphasis is placed more on community than on individual concerns. It's pretty easy to see Jesus as an exemplar of this stage of human spiritual development.

Can you guess the stage in which many people remain? It's the teenage stage, where we have a hard time seeing outside our religious box and rely on the institution to give us stability. I'd definitely put Nicodemus in that category. And Jesus was challenging him to grow in spiritual maturity, to move forward into a new way of belonging, to re-formation.

This is the same challenge before us today. Unless you're one of the few enlightened ones, we're all being called to move forward into a spirituality that is both mystical and practical. This is where our resistance to empire can be most effective. Our faith can both comfort and embolden us. When our emphasis is less on matters of personal salvation and more on the well-being of the Beloved Community of all God's people and creatures, we are living into the reality of the kin-dom of God. After all, "for God so loved *the world*."

Jesus said we are born of water and the Spirit. The water of the womb and the breath of life launched us on our way. The water of our baptism sealed us again with the Spirit and ordained us to our life's mission as followers of Jesus. As each new age requires disciples to respond to the empire of that age, Jesus calls us forward now. Maz Kanata was right; the belonging we seek is not behind us – it is ahead. *The Force Awakens* is not just the title of a cool movie; it is our response to the movement of the Spirit in us and in our world.

Amen

### **Genesis 12:1-4**

*The call of Abram (or Abraham as he later became known) to leave his homeland and migrate to an unknown country is one of the crucial events of the Old Testament. Despite the brevity of the text and the absence of Sarah as an equal protagonist, the passage points to forward looking spirituality. Whether the stories surrounding this migration are tribal legends or actual events, there is no doubt that they became a formative part of Israel's faith history. Later generations would look back to this patriarch and see in Abram's obedience to the divine summons the initial response to God's covenant with Israel.*

*It is written . . .*

YHWH said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people, and the home of your parents, and go to a place I will show you. I will make of you a great people. I will bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you. And all the people on the face of the earth will be blessed through you."

Abram, who was 75 years old when he left Haran, began the journey as YHWH had instructed, and his nephew Lot went with him.

### **John 3:1-17**

*The words of John 3:16 are more than a slogan to be put on signs at sports events; they describe the divine intentionality and universality. God loves the world. Salvation touches all creation, embracing our cells as well as our souls. There are no limits, outsides, or impediments to the ubiquitous and graceful providence of God.*

*It is written . . .*

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, who came to Jesus by night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God; for no one can perform the signs and wonders you, unless by the power of God."

Jesus gave Nicodemus this answer, "The truth of the matter is, unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said, "How can an adult be born a second time? I can't go back into my mother's womb to be born again!"

Jesus replied:

"The truth of the matter is,  
no one can enter God's kingdom  
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.

Don't be astonished when I tell you that  
you must be born from above.  
The wind blows where it will.  
You hear the sound it makes,  
but you don't know where it comes from  
or where it goes.  
So it is with everyone  
who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said, "How can this be possible?"  
Jesus replied, "You're a teacher of Israel, and you still don't understand these matters?  
The truth of the matter is,  
we're talking about what we know;  
we're testifying about what we've seen –  
yet you don't accept our testimony.  
If you don't believe  
When I tell you about earthly things,  
how will you believe  
when I tell you about heavenly things?  
No one has gone up to heaven  
except the One who came down from heaven -  
the Chosen One.  
As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,  
so the Chosen One must be lifted up,  
so that everyone who believes the Chosen One  
might have eternal life.  
Yes, God so loved the world  
as to give the Only Begotten One,  
that whoever believes may not die,  
but have eternal life.  
God sent the Only Begotten into the world  
not to condemn the world,  
but that through the Only Begotten the world might be saved.