

1) Curious conversation, is it not?

Nicodemus: *You are a teacher come from God* Jesus: *You must be born anew.*

Nicodemus: *How can old folks go back and be infants?*

Jesus: *You need both water birth AND Spirit birth—  
and the moving of the Spirit is like the blowing of the wind!*

Nicodemus: *How can these things be?*

Jesus: *You're a teacher, Nicodemus, you should know.*

*If you can't even see what's under your nose, how will you see what's beyond the stars?*

In a previous professional life, I taught Introduction to Logic.

The answers of Jesus to the questions of Nicodemus  
sound like one *non sequitur* after another.

They just don't follow—You can't get there from here.

If Jesus had been in my logic class, I'd have remanded him for remedial training.

Poor Nicodemus comes in the dark, and he leaves the same way—  
a “deer in the headlights” look on his face.

Why does he come at night?

- Maybe he's had a busy day.
- Maybe he's nervous about being seen in public
- Maybe he's looking for serious discussion—rabbis often studied the law at night

Why is Jesus so obtuse?

- Maybe he's a morning person—he gets fuzzy after sundown.
- Maybe he's the one who's nervous.  
(The storyteller has just said that Jesus *didn't trust himself to anyone.*)
- Since the Storyteller also says that *Jesus knew what was in everyone*,  
perhaps Jesus knows that whatever he says, Nick just won't get it.  
So, maybe Jesus is stalling for time—  
trying to shape a space in the moment for a teachable moment down the track.

2) That last option is worth exploring.

We usually come to teachers expecting them to teach us lots of new things.

when sometimes what we really need is for them to help us see things in a whole new way.

Not once, not twice, but three times over Jesus prefaces his answers to Nicodemus' questions  
with the same strange phrase: literally, *AMEN! AMEN!*—which means:

*Very truly I tell you—I'm telling you the truth here—*

*The truth you're looking for is not the truth you need.*

*You're asking, Nicodemus, for a “one size fits all” answer.*

*But what your soul longs for is not a clear-cut answer, but a life-changing adventure.*

3) We do well to pause and ponder this familiar story,

because the typical response is to jump to conclusions about it—one way or another.

The default reading of John 3 is that the back and forth between Nicodemus and Jesus  
is only a prelude to the bottom line—John 3:16:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son  
that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

- Some say: *If you believe that—voila—you're a Christian.  
And if you don't—too bad—you're "condemned."*
- Others say: *That is arrogant religious exclusivism and inexcusable moral intimidation.*

Both conclusions are perfectly clear—both could use a dose of complexity—  
which is just what Gospel Writer John serves up in this story.

Nicodemus comes to the conversation with a clear idea of who Jesus is.

In three fell swoops, Jesus catapults his clarity into total confusion.

What an odd way to secure a religious conversion!

4) But maybe that's the underlying question here—what does “conversion” mean?

- Literally: “to turn around,” “to change direction” – yes, but how?
  - Turn on a dime, in no time flat?
  - Take a clover leaf exit off I-70 E, and immediately reenter onto I-70 W?
- It sounds like that's just what Abram does in this morning's other story.  
God says GO, and Abram just DOES—But that's not how it happens.
- All we heard was a four-verse lead in to a story that, in Genesis,  
takes fifteen long chapters to sample one hundred long years.
- If we go back a mere five verses in this storytelling, we hear that when God calls,  
Abram is already heading in basically the right direction—  
from the land of Ur toward the land of Caanan.  
God's call to Abram is not to go in the opposite direction;  
instead, the call is: *“Don't settle down; Abram, don't get stuck. Just keep moving.”*
- There are many mark points in Abram's long journey,  
but it's no straight-line trajectory soaring onward, upward toward the City of God.  
It's a trajectory of twists and turns, detours, side trips, and back tracks  
as God and Abram try to figure out how in the world they can trust each other.  
A quick illustration:  
When Abram's journey takes to Egypt, the pharaoh takes a shine to his wife.  
Worried about his own safety, Abram asks his wife to say that she's his sister.  
He says, in effect: *“Let the pharaoh have you, so he doesn't get me.”*  
This puts his wife in a compromising position, to say the least.  
Thus the man Paul has just described as “righteous” because of his “belief”  
is at this point in his journey a moral coward.
- God does give Abram signs along the way—some of which he clings to for dear life,  
and gets stuck in; so God has to spring him loose from the bind he's in.
- All along the way, God keeps reaching out, nudging, restarting the conversation—  
even when Abram just isn't listening or just doesn't get it.  
When Abram does things that are self-destructive,  
God keeps coming on back, calling him into a name that is new.
- The same pattern unfolds when God leads Abraham's children out of Egypt,  
across the Red Sea, through the wilderness, into the Promised Land.
- The pattern recurs when Israel is carried off to exile, and God brings them back home.
- Now here is Nicodemus at his own stuck point.  
He'd rather have a sign to clutch, than a road to travel.

*Please Jesus, he seems to beg, if you come from God (and the signs say you do),  
can't you just lead us straight from here to the Kingdom of God?*

- To which Jesus replies, *You know your history and theology better, Nick.  
That ain't gonna happen—but there's Good News:  
God never quits infusing fresh life and love when folks run out of both.*  
How that fresh life and love break in is never predictable in prospect;  
but it's often evident in retrospect.
- Nicodemus protests that Jesus should cut him some slack—he's an old man.  
Fair point—But how old was Abram when his faith journey started?  
Well, Abram began a new life when he began afresh, born from above—at age 75.

5) So now it's easier to see, is it not, the logic in Jesus' seeming *non sequiturs* to Nicodemus?

- Jesus has to dislodge the expectations on which Nicodemus is fixated,  
and that can't be done without seriously disorienting him.  
For his own new life to get fully underway,  
Nicodemus needs a whole new way of making sense.
- But this new way, is, in fact, God's old way—  
blowing in, from seemingly out of nowhere, with fresh new life and love.  
When Israel was dying in the desert, God gave them new life  
by having Moses raise a sign of healing over them  
and tell them to look up toward the life that was coming from above.  
Now, Jesus says, God will give new life by the raising—and the raising—of a Son.
- Yet poor Nicodemus is not in a place where he can hear this Good News.  
So Jesus stalls him—hollows out in him a remembering space.  
Jesus tells him things he can't understand in the moment,  
so that Nicodemus will remember that he did not understand.  
When the time is right, and the teachable moment comes,  
the words of Jesus will come back—not to haunt Nicodemus, but to heal him.
- So, out goes Nick, confused, and unconverted. End of story—NO, NOT end of story.  
He has, like Abram, already begun the journey by coming to Jesus.  
More important—in the story of Jesus told by John's Gospel,  
we pick up other pieces of the Nicodemus story—not just once, but twice.
  - Shortly after this encounter with Jesus, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath.  
The Pharisees are outraged, and try to arrest Jesus.  
Nicodemus intervenes: *Our law does not allow us to condemn without a hearing*
  - After Jesus is crucified, with anyone associated with him under suspicion,  
Nicodemus brings one hundred pounds of spices to anoint Jesus' body.In other words, in both cases, Nicodemus risks his life for no good reason—  
no good reason save for the life and love of God.

6) God so loves the world—God so deeply invests in the living, loving, healing process—  
that God finds ways to intervene, again and again.

Providing signs—not fixed points to which we cling,  
but trail markers by which we travel—signs to raise our hopes,  
signs to guide us in faith-ing our way forward.

God meets us not just at the end of the journey, but at every stuck point along the way.  
Lent is a time to focus on our stuck points, trusting God will use them as turning points.

Points where, born again and born from above, we will discover that we are born anew.