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Seeking Spiritual Direction

John 3:3

I am a person who has difficulty putting anything together without step-by-step directions. Life is difficult enough, but some situations call for directions.

When babies are born, they do not come with directions. Thus, new parents can take a class on how to take care of their newborn baby. High school students can turn to teachers and counselors for direction in preparing for SAT exams and applying to college. Young adults who desire to marry can turn to pastors and counselors for direction in preparing for marriage. And for all who drive an automobile, following the One Way signs may save your life.

Where do people turn for spiritual direction in life? Some check their horoscope or read self-help books. Many tune in to watch Oprah. Others may talk with a good friend or a life coach. Christians seek spiritual direction by talking with their pastor, reading the Bible, going on retreat, and even listening to a sermon. Yet, many people bristle when they hear some Christians offer spiritual direction as if it were a One Way sign by saying, "*You must be born again.*" Didn't Jesus say it? Yes, but the familiarity of this phrase may lead to misunderstanding its meaning.

Bishop N.T. Wright of Durham, England tells the true story of an older woman who routinely brought her cat to church. During communion, she would break her communion wafer in half and give it to her cat. One day, the Anglican rector of the parish church had a talk with the woman in his study about her unusual communion practice. She explained that the cat "*was the reincarnation of her late husband*". Clearly, this cannot be what it means to be "born again."

Nicodemus, a member of the Council of Jewish Teachers of the Law came at night to talk with Jesus. Nicodemus says (vs. 2): "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." Nicodemus was impressed by the signs of Jesus' spiritual power to produce dramatic change.

In previous chapters, John depicts these dramatic changes at the wedding feast in Cana as Jesus changes water into wine, and by Jesus expelling the merchants and moneychangers from the Temple who had turned it into the Mall of the Middle East.

Instead of being allured by Nicodemus' gracious accolades, Jesus senses that Nicodemus is seeking spiritual direction in his life. Nicodemus knows all about how to function as a religious leader, but what he seeks is spiritual vitality in his life. What he desires is what all of us desire, namely to experience effervescent joy in life like water changed into wine.

In *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, Episcopal priest, teacher and author, Barbara Brown Taylor writes about spirituality as "the practice of waking up to God". She says it is about

wanting more as she reflects on her faith experience as a burnt-out pastor and her conversations with Christians who also felt unsatisfied in their faith and life.

“We wanted more than set worship services or church work could offer us. We wanted more than planning scavenger hunts for youth group, more than polishing silver with the altar guild, more than serving on the outreach committee or rehearsing anthems with the choir. We wanted More. We wanted a deeper sense of purpose. We wanted a stronger sense of God’s presence. We wanted more reliable ways both to seek and to stay in that presence – not for an hour on Sunday morning or Wednesday afternoon but for as much time as we could stand.” (pp. 6-7)

How do we experience more of God’s presence in our lives? Jesus says to Nicodemus (vs. 3), “. . . ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’” The Greek word ‘anōthen’ can be translated to mean ‘again’, ‘anew’, or ‘from above’.

Nicodemus’ response reveals how he took Jesus’ words literally by assuming that one had to be “born again” by starting life all over again (vs. 4): “‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’” Jesus’ response affirms his agreement with Nicodemus that no one can live life over again (vs. 5-6):

“Jesus answered, ‘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.’”

To be “born of the flesh” is how human beings come into this earthly existence out of their mother’s womb. The amniotic fluid that surrounds the fetus is the water that breaks from which is birthed a baby. Jesus refers to human birth as “born of water”. Physical birth is a one-time event.

To be “born of the Spirit” is different as not being a one-time event like the birth of a child, but the birth and rebirth of spiritual awakening. Similar to waking up each morning from a night’s sleep, spiritual birth is waking up to God daily in keeping our lives attuned to God in the way of Jesus. It is about submitting to God’s will in our lives, instead of what we want, by learning to embody in our lives the values of the kingdom of God.

Jesus describes spiritual birth as similar to the wind which is beyond our understanding and control (vs. 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.” The Greek word ‘pneuma’ means both “Spirit” and “wind”.

Puzzled, Nicodemus said (vs. 9): “‘How can these things be?’” Jesus tells Nicodemus that to be “born of the Spirit” differs from ritual practices and codes of conduct. Rather, God births faith as life anew, a fresh start!

Abraham embodied faith as a fresh start (Genesis 12:1, 4): “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’ . . . “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.”

A few years ago, the writer Anne Lamont addressed the graduates of University of California, Berkeley about what she believed is important in life by saying:

“I’ve been waiting to be a successful author all my life. But when I finally did it, I was like a greyhound catching the mechanical rabbit she’d been chasing all her life – metal, wrapped up in cloth. It wasn’t alive, it had no spirit. It was fake. Fake doesn’t feed

anything. Only spirit feeds spirit It had nothing that could slake the lifelong thirst I had for a little immediacy, and connection.”

Do you yearn for more in life – faith for a fresh start? As Peter, Paul and Mary used to sing: “The answer my friend is blowing in the wind. The answer is blowing in the wind.” AMEN.