

Pick it up, read it: John 3:1-17

## **Embracing Jesus as the Christ means becoming a new person, not a better one.**

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [February 17, 1999](#) issue

One of the disadvantages of being both a Lutheran and an academician is that you hear so few good conversion stories. The weight of my tradition identifies regeneration with the work of God in baptism. Those who tell their conversion stories with great gusto or whose spiritual c.v. runs on for pages (or hours) are automatically suspect in my denomination.

And among academics, whose business it is not to change their minds abruptly, it's hard to find stories like the evangelist Billy Sunday's, who one day walked out of a Chicago bar and said to his teammates, "I'm through. I am going to Jesus Christ." Or St. Augustine's, for that matter, whose famous conversion experience involved little more than naïve obedience to a desperate impulse. Overhearing a child's game in which one of the participants cried, *Tolle, lege*, "pick it up, read it," Augustine quickly flung open his Bible to the passage that changed the rest of his life.

For many, such stories hold only historical or sociological interest. After a group of religion majors viewed Robert Duvall's brilliant parable of regeneration, *The Apostle*, about half the group confessed, in so many words, that the film was unintelligible to them.

The Bible has many images for the dramatic change that takes place in those who have been called (or cornered) by God. It is represented by the move from death to life, lost to found, past to future, and darkness to light.

For Nicodemus, the cautious "teacher of Israel," the nocturnal dialogue brings the idea of a new birth or a birth from above. Embracing Jesus as the Christ does not mean becoming a better person but a new person. Nicodemus's alarming difficulty with metaphor--"You mean I must reenter my mother's womb?"--does not betray stupidity or prosaic literalism as much as resistance to the sort of change Jesus'

words imply. When faced with the rabbi's shocking alternative, who among us would not try to buy a little time?

Nicodemus thus becomes one of the biggest and most reluctant newborns on record. His stature, age and religious accomplishments were such that birth for him must have been a terrible trauma, an event mixed with pain and blinding new perceptions. He did what most babies do; he squinted against the light and wept with nostalgia for the womb, the old country, the former life.

On the one hand, being born again is as easy as repenting and turning toward a new way of life. For Sonny, the ne'r-do-well evangelist in *The Apostle*, it meant that he would deep-six his Lincoln (vanity plates included) into a river, an act which symbolizes the death of the old self. He would then immerse himself in the same river, reemerge as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and conduct a ministry of good works among the poor. What could be simpler? One can't help but suspect that being born again is a difficult concept only for those who have been lucky enough to escape catastrophe. Ask anyone who has ever "come to himself" in a pigsty, and he will tell you it's not all that complicated.

On the other hand, the many sophisticated word-plays in this passage remind us how difficult it is to make a formula for spiritual regeneration. The evangelist pulls meanings out of words like rabbits from a silk hat: *born from above* may mean *born again*; the *wind* that blows where it wills may just be the *Spirit* wafting through the empty regions of our lives. The Greek word for the pole on which the serpent is lifted up is "sign," the writer's favorite word for miracle. The ambiguities in John's Gospel warn us against trying to engineer our own rebirth with self-administered therapies.

Nor should "born again" be reduced to a political shibboleth. A young acquaintance of mine is trying to make it in the political bureaucracy of Washington, D.C. He tells me with only a hint of irony that one way to begin is by getting into an "influential prayer group." The password? "Born again."

How can this be if the new birth is like the wind? We do not make the clouds move or the prairie billow like ocean waves. With the rest of creation, we submit to the wind and its caprice. Who is to say whether this chance encounter or that tumorous growth, this melody in a cafe or that agonizing defeat, are merely the winds of chance that blow through everyone's life, or the "signs" of the Spirit who caresses us like a mother or a lover? What language shall we borrow with which to narrate our

lives? For some it will be the formulas of spiritual certainty; for others, the evocation of mystery.

To be "born again" does not mean that one can always chronicle the date and time of conversion or explain it to an audience's satisfaction.

Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus preserves a space for mystery, a sacred vestibule to experience, choice and language. The two rabbis speak under cloak of darkness, and Jesus says that whatever happens to Nicodemus will resemble the winds of chance on a warm Judean night. Just as an invisible *something* parts our hair and kisses our face, the Spirit stirs in us before we have words to name the stirring.

You will be made new through water and the Spirit, Jesus says. But even water is ambiguous. It may be a river that ravages the villages on its banks, a river for drowning and forgetting. Or it may be the church's river of life, a river for baptizing and remembering. "Born again" glides beneath the surface of time and place in the river of God's freedom. The Spirit of God makes us clean and whole and delivers us from drowning before we can swim a stroke.