

I received a letter this week that I want to read to you.



“Dear Anna: I’m writing to you because I just don’t know what to do. I hope you can help. You’re a prophet and have lived at the Temple for so many years that you have to know what is going on with this rabbi named Jesus.

I believe you saw Jesus when he was presented at the Temple just 8 days old for our circumcision ritual required for all male children. I know you spoke about the child to all that would listen that he was the redemption of Jerusalem. But I just don’t understand that.

My husband, Nicodemus, returned late the other night after having met up with Jesus, now a grown man. He was raving about that Jesus. I’m afraid he’s going to get us into trouble if

Nicodemus isn’t careful about whom he talks to. I need your advice on how to calm Nicodemus down. My level-headed Nicodemus is just not himself following that meeting with Jesus.

Nicodemus is, as you know, a leader and a teacher. He has an important position in our community. He reads and studies the Torah. And you know the Torah teaches us about ways to choose life and not death. He is most learned and people look up to him. Frankly, I’m scared that he’s been bewitched by that man Jesus. I need your help on how to calm Nicodemus down so we can go back to our peaceful life. I’m afraid nothing is going to be the same!

Nicodemus has done the unthinkable. He slipped out of our house at night after everyone else had gone to bed. Why would he be so secretive? I just don’t understand. And then! When he came back, he woke me up and told me the oddest thing. He and Jesus had talked and talked but Nicodemus was still puzzled. And now Nicodemus is wandering around the house muttering to himself about what Jesus said. He’s even humming a song: “blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of His spirit, washed in His blood.”¹ Huh! Catchy tune but who ever heard of such a song.

And get this: Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born from above. Can you imagine that? No one can be born again! That’s just craziness. And I’m afraid Nicodemus is going to get into trouble if he continues this obsession with Jesus.

Born from above. Babies aren’t born from above. They’re born from their mother’s body, here on earth. But Nicodemus says Jesus insists we must be born of the Spirit. Jesus said to think about the wind: it comes from where we know not and it goes where we know not but we know the wind exists and it can change our lives. What foolishness is this? Wind, spirit – what do I care for them unless the wind blows so strongly that it ruins our crops or means the boats can’t go out to fish?

¹ “Blessed assurance” in Lift Every Voice and Sing (New York: Church Publishing, 1993), 184

Genesis 12:1-4a; Ps. 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Nicodemus insists that Jesus was speaking metaphorically. That we need to be focused on God and God's love for us, not concerned with earthly things. Well, that's ok for Jesus because he's an itinerant preacher and doesn't even have a home. He has to depend on friends for a place to stay and for food to eat. But we're got a house to keep up and a small garden for vegetables and fruit. We are firmly planted in this earth- pah! - on this metaphorical speech. Give me good, concrete rules any day.

Oh, I know. The Torah tells us that God told Abram to get up and go. And can you believe that Abram did so – he didn't even have a destination! Just get up and go and God would tell you along the way where to go. Well, I bet Sarai wasn't happy about that! How can you plan for your journey – how much food to take or whether you'll need summer or winter clothes- if you don't know where you are going?

Yes, I know that God told Abram that if Abram got up and went that God would bless Abram and yes, it's true, that we hold Abraham as our ancestor in the faith. But I bet Sara wasn't happy with this vague command to get up and go. But what could she do? You know we women don't have much ability to say no. Really, these men!

And yes, Anna, I know that the psalmist tells us that our help comes from the Lord and that the Lord will watch over us but I've got to live here and now. And the Lord doesn't always seem to come to my assistance when things are going badly. Just think about the famine we had a couple of years ago. Where was the Lord then? He sure didn't keep the sun from striking our fields and withering the plants in the ground! Where was the Lord then?

Now you know, Anna, that we are observant Jews. We follow the teachings quite closely. We honor God with our bodies and our bounty. We wait for the Messiah, the one who will lift the burden of Rome from us. But this man Jesus! Well, I tell you, he's going to come to a bad end. Imagine saying that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. And Jesus says that he is this Son of God. That's going to get him killed, you mark my words!

Nicodemus says that “faith is our experience and relationship with God and with others.”² That when we are born from above, we are to place all our trust and faith in God. He says that “faith has three components: trust in God, beliefs about God and the way we live our lives.” That we can have eternal or everlasting life if we believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

But get this! Jesus is not going to bring us relief from Rome. Well, what good is he as a Messiah if we still have to live under Roman rule – none in my book! But enough of this Jesus!

Can you help me talk to Nicodemus? I'm so concerned. He's become absent-minded because he keeps trying to figure out what Jesus really meant by having to be born from above and all the other things they talked about that night. It's really scary. I need some help. Can you help me, Anna? Please! I await your reply.

With love, your cousin, Bethany, wife of Nicodemus.”

² Laird Stewart in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 64.

Two Lent

March 16, 2014

Genesis 12:1-4a; Ps. 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17