

Miraculous Faith

Psalm 121

John 3: 1-17

Purpose: *To help people identify that miraculous faith (i.e. belief in Jesus) exists for them personally and links them with God.*

Lewis Carroll in his story “Through the Looking Glass” tells how Alice, the hero of his story, meets the White Queen. After talking about a great many things, the conversation turns to age. Alice tells the Queen that she is seven and a half years old to which the Queen announces that she is one hundred and one years, five months and a day old. “I can't believe that!” says Alice. “Can't you?” the White Queen replies with great pity. “Try again: Draw a long breath and close your eyes.”

Well, I have to say that I agree with Alice. There are some things that I can't believe in either. Like leprechauns! I really don't think that there are any wrinkly little men hiding near the wood heap in the manse back yard. No matter how long I close my eyes or how deeply I draw my breath or close my eyes, I still don't believe in leprechauns. Not that I'm picking on the

Irish mind you. I don't believe in trolls either! Or pixies, or goblins or any other magical creatures of fairy land.

There are other things that I cannot believe in. I cannot believe that Adolf Hitler was a good man or that Elvis Presley is alive and well and hiding out to avoid crowds of fans in down town Alice Springs. Nor do I believe that earth is flat, or that crocodiles mainly eat vegetables, or that the cuckoo clock that once hung over my grandmother's kitchen table could ever mark the passing of the hour with a little dog, instead of a little bird, poking his head out of the window and barking. All the grunting and huffing and puffing in the world will not help me believe that it will snow this year in Darwin at Christmas. And even if I close my eyes and breathe deeply for a whole week, I really cannot believe that Campbell Newman will be elected Pope at the next meeting in Rome of the College of Cardinals.

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Once upon a time, I could not believe in God either. As a child, my mother and father took me to Sunday School. We went to Church each week. Every night until we left home at eighteen, my twin brother and I used Daily Notes from Scripture Union to study the bible before we

went to bed. It's not just that I didn't believe. I couldn't believe even though I wanted to! It didn't matter how many times I accepted the preacher's invitation to accept Jesus into my heart – and I did many times – faith and I never really met. Deep breathing and closed eyes wouldn't have helped a bit. Even though I heard the words and responded in hope, I still couldn't believe that God was real and I was a child of God.

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In the gospel today, Jesus explains the mystery of faith. By night, Nicodemus comes to Jesus with pressing questions. He wants to know the nuts and bolts of coming to faith. "How," he asks, can these things be?" So Jesus answers the riddle. "Nicodemus, it comes from above" – the Greek word is *anōthen* – "from above Nicodemus! You can't do it for yourself, Nicodemus. It's out of your control!" *anōthen* – it's the word Matthew uses when at the moment when Jesus breathes his last and the veil in the temple is ripped in two – *anōthen* – from above, top to bottom.

"What have I got to do? How is it possible for me? What action can I take?" But, Jesus responds with surprising

images. Birth, wind, spirit and that Greek word *anóthen*. It comes from above!

“Isn’t it interesting,” writes the American Methodist Bishop William Willimon, “that when people talk about this passage today, making it the very hall mark of the Christian faith, the one and necessary path to the kingdom, they often speak of the way Nicodemus misunderstood it rather than the way Jesus explained it.

Relying on an unfortunate translation of the original Greek into English they say: “You must be born again” Like a second time or something.”¹ “No!” Jesus said. Turn up your hearing aid, Nicodemus. “You must be born from above.” *Anóthen*.

“Remember Nicodemus,” Jesus implies, “When you were born into your natural family you had no control over that and you have no control over being born into God's family either. Flesh is flesh and Spirit is Spirit. It comes from above, Nicodemus. The wind blows where it will!”

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It would be so much easier wouldn't it, if Jesus had answered Nicodemus' nuts and bolts question with a

¹ William H Willimon, "The Spirit Blows Where It Will," *Pulpit Resource* 13, no. 1 (1996): 36.

nuts and bolts answer? Like, “pray this prayer! Or, “fill out this form!” Sign on the dotted line, Nicodemus, and you’re in! A fully fledged, paid up, voting member of the body of Christ!

Or like the White Queen to Alice: “Take a deep breath, Nicodemus. Close your eyes, Nicodemus. Try a bit harder, Nicodemus, and you’ll find that you can believe!”

But, Jesus says: “It’s a gift, Nicodemus. It’s a miracle! Nicodemus. It’s from above Nicodemus. You can’t do it on your own.”

And of course, we do believe! God gives us eyes to see him, the means to reach out to him, the wonderful gift of faith. It comes to us from above. It reaches into us from the top down and we are born anew as children of God.

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That's the bottom line. You can't do it by yourself. It's confusing I know. We are such high achievers. Do it yourself is in our blood. Is there a technique we can learn? Is there a book that can teach us? Are there illustrated instructions? No, it comes from above. It's God's gift.

And in your hearts you that it's true! Because you know that no matter how hard you try, in our own strength you can't look a young woman in the eye who has just been diagnosed with Motor Neurone disease and believe in Jesus. By your own strength, in the face of difficult times in your business or in your relationships, you can not profess faith. God is beyond our best efforts. And guessing at God, passing on rumours about God, or simply remembering God, are simply not enough. We can't do it by on our own. Faith, believing in Jesus, is a miracle that from the top down has become part of your life.

Yet, you have believed. Grieving with the loss of someone you love, God has loved you. Deep down, you know it! In all kinds of circumstances, confronted with all sorts of events that no one – least of all you – really understands, you have confidence in Jesus. Things may not add and always make sense, but you have believed! Not because you have closed your eyes and taken a deep breath, but because God staked a claim over your life and gave you new birth: from the top down, top to bottom – *another* – from above.

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Christina Rossetti described faith as “like a lily lifted high and white.” Charles Henry Parkhurst, who as president of “The Society for the Prevention of Crime” exposed political corruption in the (New York) Tammany Hall scandal called it a “winged intellect.” George McDonald said, “The principle part of faith is patience.” The author of the epistle to the Hebrews says that it is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.

But, in today’s gospel Jesus reveals that it is a miracle. God’s loving gift for people who can’t do it all for themselves and that he Jesus is at the centre of that miracle: “for God so loved the world that he gave us his son.”

O what a gift, what a wonderful gift!
Who can tell the wonders of the Lord?
Let us open our eyes, our ears and our hearts:
it is Christ the Lord it is he! ²

² Pat Uhl, “Canticle of the Gift” *Together in Song* (1999).