

“Nicodemus Encounters Jesus”

John 3:1-21

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Last Sunday we began our study of the Gospel of John by looking at Jesus' first sign performed at a wedding in Cana. At the beginning of chapter 2 Jesus miraculously turns water into wine. This was not just a miracle he did to impress everyone - instead, the signs we will see throughout the gospel always point to something else more important. In this case the water turned into wine points to the overflowing abundance of God's love.

Following this passage in chapter 2 Jesus goes to the temple on the Passover and he runs the money changers out of there using a whip of cords. God's house should not be a marketplace, Jesus insists. And while in Jerusalem we are told Jesus did many other signs, and many of the Jews there believed in him because of the miracles he was doing (2.23). But Jesus was not pleased with those who needed signs to believe in him - no, faith required something else.

Today we turn to chapter 3, and while the other gospels often move quickly from one action scene to the next, the Gospel of John does something different. John invites us to pause, to listen in and to linger over the conversations Jesus has with significant characters of faith. One such character is Nicodemus who has an important encounter with Jesus. So let us prepare to hear God's word again as it comes to us from John's gospel, chapter 3, beginning with verse 1:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” 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. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world

might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Imagine this: you're home on a Saturday afternoon and someone comes and knocks on your door. You don't want to be rude so you decide to open it, and the person begins to have a conversation with you. Or you are out walking in your neighborhood with your dog one evening, and someone you see stops and begins to talk with you. Or you are in the parking lot outside a football stadium, getting in line to buy a ticket, and someone hands you a pamphlet and starts to talk. In all of these instances, the people ask you the same question: Have you been born again? Do you know what it means to be a born again Christian?

If you are at least my age and have grown up in the south, you probably have had such experiences before. The passage from John's gospel today contains perhaps the most popular verse in the whole Bible, John 3:16. It's often displayed on bumper stickers and posters at sporting events. Last week as I drove up Beaver Creek Road I saw several yard signs with John 3.16 printed in bold letters. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” This verse has become the slogan for “born again” Christianity, the brand of faith that says that our salvation depends on our belief in Jesus. “Believe in Jesus, and you are saved. Don't believe and you will perish in hell.” And if you don't dedicate your life to Jesus at a revival with lots of emotions and tears, then your salvation really is not guaranteed.

As someone who grew up around this brand of Christianity, I understand that many people do have dramatic conversion experiences where God speaks and acts in miraculous ways. And sincere people often want others to have similar experiences. But as you know, we all are different and no one experience fits us all. Unfortunately, I believe John 3:16 is often taken out of context from the rest of the chapter, and when that happens we lose a lot. This one verse by itself has been used as a litmus test for being a Christian - either you are in or you're out, and it all depends on whether or not you have a personal testimony about being saved.

So this morning I invite you to take a closer look at this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus - not just one verse but the whole story. It begins with Nicodemus - a Pharisee, a respected leader of the Jews - he comes to have a conversation with Jesus at night. In the history of interpreting this passage much has been made of Nicodemus as being a shady, cowardly figure since he comes to Jesus at night. Night, darkness, evil... you get the picture! But I believe if we allow this one factor to cast a negative shadow on the whole conversation, then I think we are missing out on a lot of positives. One of the primary characteristics of being a disciple is seeking Jesus out, and this is clearly what Nicodemus does. When he addresses Jesus he does so with lots of respect. “Rabi, teacher - we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these signs unless God is with him.” Instead of responding to this directly, Jesus goes in another direction. Jesus says, “I tell you, unless someone is born from above, it is impossible to see God's kingdom.” Now this is where things get interesting, and it's hard to capture it all in the English translation. The Greek word

translated as “born from above” really has a double meaning - it also can mean to be “born again.” In describing what is required to see God’s kingdom, Jesus uses this double-meaning word to move us beyond the surface level to a deeper, more challenging one. And it becomes clear that Nicodemus simply doesn’t get it - he is oblivious to the potential spiritual meaning of being born from above, and instead gets stuck on the literal meaning of being born again physically. “How can a grown up person re-enter their mother’s womb a second time?” he protests. It just doesn’t make sense according to his world view. But instead of scolding him or mocking him for his answer, Jesus does something remarkable - he doesn’t clear things up but rather makes them even more mysterious. Jesus says, “Unless you are born of water and the spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the spirit is spirit. Don’t be surprised that I say to you, you must be born from above!”

In response to a sincere man who comes with a partial understanding of Jesus, the Rabbi Jesus takes it to another level. He invites Nicodemus to consider not only the physical birth from water but also the spiritual birth from above, the birth that comes as a gift of the spirit that blows where it wills. Though Nicodemus began the conversation confident about what he knew was true about Jesus, his confidence has been replaced with an honest confession of unbelief: “How can these things be?” “How can they be true?” And these words will be the last ones we hear from Nicodemus in this conversation.

According to the “born again version” of Christianity, by his refusal to get on board with Jesus, Nicodemus has become the poster boy of what it means to be lost. By not being born again in this one exchange, then he certainly must have suffered eternal consequences, right? But I think this is the wrong conclusion to make. While John 3.16 is arguably the most beloved and most quoted verse in the whole Bible, in my experience this verse has frequently been mis-interpreted to cast judgment and condemnation on many people. God’s love is what makes possible the gift of new life and new birth, and it is a gift we must receive through faith. But when we with certainty make the assumption that condemnation and punishment will be coming for those who do not proudly wear the label of “born again,” this assumption is simply wrong. In fact, the next verse, John 3.17 makes it clear that judgment is not God’s intention at all: “God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” If the almighty creator and author of salvation does not judge, then who are we to do that to others? In fact, this passage makes the point that if we chose the darkness instead of the light, then the judgement for that decision is on us, not on God!

When we pull one verse out of the whole Bible, we tend to miss the bigger picture. Though Nicodemus’ conversation with Jesus ends in chapter 3, this is not the end of Nicodemus in the gospel story. When we get to chapter 7, we discover that some of the Pharisees are wanting the Roman guards to arrest Jesus because he was claiming to be the Messiah. When the guards return to the Pharisees without having arrested Jesus, the religious leaders are not happy. “Why didn’t you bring him to us?” they ask. “Have you been deceived?” And out of nowhere a voice speaks out in defense of Jesus - it’s not the voice of Peter or James or John, or a believer from the crowd - no, it’s the voice of Nicodemus who stands up for Jesus. “Our law doesn’t judge someone without first hearing him, and learning what he is doing, does it?” With these words Nicodemus stands up for Jesus, a sign that perhaps the Spirit is continuing to work in his life.

And when we get towards the end of the gospel, Nicodemus appears at another crucial moment. After Jesus’ death, a man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea asks permission from Pilate to bury Jesus’ body. And in chapter 19, verse 39 we are told that it is Nicodemus who brings a mixture of

aloe and myrrh - expensive ingredients used to anoint the body for burial. Joseph and Nicodemus follow the Jewish burial customs, carefully wrapping Jesus' body with spices and wrapping it in linens. They take Jesus' body to a garden, close to the place where he was crucified - and they place his body there (19.39-42).

While all the other disciples have fled, having abandoned and denied their Lord, we see that it is Nicodemus along with Joseph who care for Jesus in his death. Do we know for sure if Nicodemus comes to a point in his life when he professes Jesus as his Lord? We do not know for sure. What we do know is that he was willing to take bold acts of discipleship for the sake of Jesus, and that his example has been an inspiration for many. Bible scholar Gail O'Day has pointed out that for many African American slaves, Nicodemus was a model of faith. Slaves knew about the need to gather in secret and worship at night. "The slaves saw in Nicodemus' night visit proof that it was possible to come to Jesus even when those in power forbade it" ([New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9, p. 555](#)). In Kansas there's a town called Nicodemus. Founded in 1877 it became a destination for newly freed slaves who left the poor conditions in the South and migrated there to begin a new life. Nicodemus has indeed been an inspiration for many.

Yes, there are many paths to follow as disciples of Christ, and some of us may very well have conversion moments when we come face to face with God in a dramatic way. For others, the life of faith is a journey - our spiritual growth is gradual - and there are no mountain top experiences and spiritual moments when we suddenly are born again. I love this story of Nicodemus, not only found here in the 3rd chapter of John but in the other moments of his discipleship later in the gospel. Nicodemus' story is a reminder that God's Spirit sometimes takes time to nurture faith, and so we should never give up on anyone, including ourselves. The remarkable good news is that God's love is just not for the few - it's not just for the religious people who are holy or the good people who follow the rules - no, God's love is for the whole world, the whole cosmos - and that there's nothing in life or in death that can ever separate us from that love. May we embrace this good news, and celebrate the gift of new life born of the water and the Spirit. Amen.