

John 3:1-17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus^[a] 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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”^[b] ⁴ 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?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.^[c] ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You^[d] must be born from above.’^[e] ⁸ The wind^[f] 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.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you^[g] do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[h] ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[i]

¹⁶ “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.

¹⁷ “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.

Since February, we have been following the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), a three-year cycle; year A, B, and C of weekly scripture readings used by a vast majority of mainline protestant churches. The RCL is built around the seasons of the church calendar and it includes four sets of scripture passages, one from each section of our Bible; the Hebrew Bible, Psalm, reading from the Epistles and a gospel reading. Each cycle focuses on one of the gospels of Matthew (A), Mark (B), and Luke (C), while the gospel of John is dispersed among all three years, especially on special seasons like Lent, Advent, and Easter. As we are in the second Sunday in Lent, our focus is turned towards the Gospel of John.

So you might be asking, “Why isn’t the gospel of John assigned a year in the cycle in the Lectionary like the other gospels?” Well, it is because John is a bit different than the other three. It’s not that it’s less spiritual, but for one, there are stories in the Gospel of John which are not in the other gospels. For instance, the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet which we love

and need to hear during Holy Week shows up at every Lent. It is also the same with Jesus' last words in the passion narrative. When the first three gospels consist of saying of Jesus and anecdotes about Jesus which are in an ancient form and reflect a consistent style and theme, the gospel of John echoes some of this, it is also rich in imaginative and artistic ways of presenting who Jesus is. A scholar said, "Comparing the first three gospels with the fourth is like comparing a photograph with a work of modern art. It reflects a lively Christian community of the late first century." And so we pause today on the story of Nicodemus and Jesus in the gospel of John chapter 3 which also contains one of the most famous scripture passages, one most Christians memorize, John 3: 16.

Many scholars say that John chapter 3 is one of the hardest to preach (And I am the one given this task this week. Thank you, Pastor Rich!). As the gospel of John is known for its richness of imagery, symbols, and themes, the section we heard read today is a very good example of this as most of them show up in this section of the reading. The themes of this gospel which also show in this section are: The dualism of Darkness and light (the knowing and not knowing, or believing and not believing), the spirit and flesh (as we are alluded to in John 1, word became flesh), and the constant invitation to "come and see".

So we begin by pondering for a minute about a time in your life when everything you knew fell apart- a time when something you thought would surely happen, didn't happen, when the foundation of your life, your understanding of life was shaken and was flipped upside down. That "What just happened?" moment that shook everything you believed and how you understood the world to be. Where do you go in that moment?

My mind goes straight to the first time I received the news that after a 2 hour interview with the Board of Ordained ministry, they recommended for me to come back a year later as they believed that I was not ready to proceed to the next steps in ordained ministry. When I strongly believed with the fullness of heart that I was called to ordained ministry, when I believed that God for sure meant for me to be ordained and to be in ministry in the church for the rest of my life, I experienced the door closing in front of me. Until that day, I believed that when I had found the path of God's will, it would be smooth sailing...but it wasn't. My understanding was that everything in my life had been leading me to "that" moment when the door of "happily ever after" was going to open, but it didn't. And so I found myself in the darkness of night-time soul searching, looking for answers to the meaning of what happened, a time to turn over and examine every stone I had piled up in my life. What had I experienced? What does this mean? Where do I go from here?

Maybe this is the kind of night Nicodemus had as he found himself in the darkness of night searching for answers. It was known that it was in the night that Jewish leaders like Nicodemus often turned to scrolls to study the laws and the teachings of rabbis. For Nicodemus, it was probably a night he would never forget because he was so perplexed that he went right to the source of his wondering, Jesus, a teacher like himself who had been known to perform signs. He had heard and witnessed Jesus who turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, overturned the table of the money changers for buying sacrificial animals in the temple, spoke of destroying and rebuilding the temple in three days, and performed other signs in Jerusalem.

He knew miracles were done to show one's power but signs were done to point to God's presence. Hence he said as a representative of the Jewish leaders "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."

Have you ever searched for the presence of God? A proof of God's existence? This is so true in today's world as we face some difficulties and challenges in our world today: natural disasters, war, violence, disease, illness, conflict... Where is God? Do you question that sometimes? It is in this questioning that Jesus says to Nicodemus and us, "If you want to see God, you must be Anothēn," Greek word which has a dual meaning. Born again or renewed, and from above.

Nicodemus knew along with the rest of his colleagues, the Jewish leaders what it meant to be in line with God. He knew as he always lived it and studied it, that focusing his whole life on the laws was the main point of his life, the way to live for God and in God. Utter obedience, somewhat blind and strict compliance of God's laws was the way to a sense of abundant life and a renewed life. For Nicodemus, there was no way that Jesus meant "to be born from above!" He was only able to hear the first option, to be born again or anew because he was unable to recognize what Jesus was offering, moreover, who Jesus really was. He thought, "Probably Jesus means to be renewed, or to be born again. I know what you mean, kind of..." It was about keeping the laws of sacrifice that kept his people in line with God, in the "kingdom of God". Even in other known religions of his day, Nicodemus knew of renewal of life or being born again as it was possible in sacrifices and ceremonial cleansings. "Oh Jesus... obviously we can't be birthed again by our mothers to gain a new life in the presence of God..."

In our quest of God's presence, in our journey to be closer to God, in our striving to find peace and assurance in our challenging world, what myths do you hold on to? And what myths do people believe in, trying to achieve a sense of peace and assurance in the world? Being morally good? Achieving a sort of recognition? Accumulating things? Winning power and fame? Striving to live a life void from stress by achieving a state of mind? Be spiritual? Maybe collect an array of degrees? This is where Jesus answers Nicodemus and us, "You must be born of water and the spirit."

For Jesus, "being born from above" means the same as being "born of water and the spirit." Being born of water refers to baptism, which is the act of discipleship or the work of the flesh, while being born of the Spirit meant the wind or the breath of God, *pneuma*, in Greek, *Ruah* in Hebrew. It alludes to the unpredictable movement of the Holy Spirit, the mystery of God's work. Maybe it is the acknowledgement of God's work in our lives and how much we allow ourselves to be influenced by the movement and calling of God, the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. So what is the work of God Jesus wants us to be influenced by? What is that wind, the breath, the spirit that moves the flesh?

"For 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." In this, Jesus is inviting Nicodemus and us to be influenced by God's work of love of the world. God's amazing Grace! Jesus invites Nicodemus and us to the "come and see" of faith and experience of life. Pastor David Lose of

Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota shared in his study of this scripture. “Perhaps, John is inviting some of those-then or now-who have difficulty believing that the cross is the moment of God’s victory to come along for the ride or in more traditionally Johannine language, (the community of the authors of the gospel of John) to “come and see”. Faith, in John’s gospel is always a verb and believing may take some longer than others. Notice that God does not ask the world if it wishes to be the recipient of God’s love. God just goes ahead and loves, and not only loves but gives the world God’s only beloved Son over to death. The one who dies for you clearly has a significant claim on you, and John makes that clear. God’s love, surprising, all encompassing, unasked for and undeserved, is also given unconditionally. God loves us, that is whether we like it or not. In the face of that kind of love, we will likely either yield to God’s love or run away screaming, for no one can remain neutral to such extravagance.”

The gospel of John reminds us this morning that we don’t have options to choose from; it is more that we have a reaction or response to make as we journey in the times of darkness in our lives. It is not about believing or not believing, it is about how we respond to the already abundant extravagant love of God that is working in our lives. So do we allow God’s love to influence your everyday life? Our Spirit is being influenced by God’s amazing love, how will we respond in the flesh?

Sadly, we do not really know the response of Nicodemus, if his actions or the work of the flesh was influenced by the work of the spirit in his life. We are told later in John chapter 7 and 8 that this pharisee advocated for Jesus in a lukewarm way in his trial in front of the Jewish leaders and that he and Joseph of Arimathea was the one to bury Jesus while providing an extravagant amount of supplies for Jesus’ burial. But was that influenced by God’s love? We don’t know...many commentaries say that is an unknown.

As we all struggle with the ambiguity of belief of others, what we do know is that we can respond to God’s love for us in Christ in being givers with HIM as we also graciously acknowledge God’s amazing grace give to us. Amen.