

Lent 2—"Jesus and Nicodemus"
March 12, 2017
Text: John 3:1-17

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
Second Sunday in Lent

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.

Who is This Jesus?

Today is the second Sunday in Lent and our Gospel readings for the next few weeks shift to the Gospel of John. A gospel composed after Matthew, Mark and Luke were finished, but written, like the others, to early church communities forging their way in this new religion that would eventually be known as Christianity. In those early days, clarity was needed. And one of the themes of John is the identity of Jesus Christ. And in John we find a very high Christology—a view of Jesus that strongly emphasizes his divinity. The gospels, each in their own way, address questions of who Jesus is, an issue foremost in the minds of their readers at the time. It was a particularly volatile issue for the Jews who were now faced with the most disruptive event in their history. The coming of the Messiah. Some believed it was Jesus, some did not, which caused division and strife. This question continues to bring all of us, at some point, to a place of reckoning over who Jesus is. This is a good question for Lent.

Never really sure from where the motivation comes to one day earnestly begin looking into these things, there comes a time when we say, “I am going to discover who this Jesus is for myself.” Not adopting someone else’s opinion, not accepting something we heard on the television, or read in a commentary, but moving directly to the source to find for ourselves what all the fuss is about. This story from the Gospel of John illustrates this kind of experience.

Two Rabbis

The sun has set. The business of the day is over. Things are settling down. And something—maybe something in the wind—prompts this curious person named Nicodemus to go and see Jesus. He’s a *Pharisee*, John writes, *a leader of the Jews, and he comes to Jesus by night, and says 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."

This is an astounding statement and confession from Nicodemus. He calls Jesus “Rabbi,” or teacher. There is respect in this name. Nicodemus is a rabbi. So, here are two rabbis exchanging thoughts about God, entering a theological discussion. But for Nicodemus, a Pharisee, to say that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God is a remarkable confession.

Jesus answers him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

We know the kingdom of God enters this world with the coming of Jesus Christ, but it’s not readily seen. But Jesus speaks in riddles when he says to see this kingdom you must be born from above.

Second Birth

Born from above?! I am just too old for this. An old dog won’t learn new tricks. At this point I am not going to change. Nicodemus says to Jesus,

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Nicodemus cannot see it. It is nighttime and he, in many ways, is in the dark. While the writer doesn't mention a wind blowing on this evening, I like to imagine there is a breeze flapping the tunics of these two rabbis as they ponder these deep theological questions.

"I tell you," Jesus says, "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.

That's two different births—one from below, and one from above.

Do not be astonished that I say to you, 'You must be born from above.'

Some say, 'born again.' Some say 'salvation.' Others talk about the day you get saved. Everyone has their own way of putting it and telling their own story. There is no one-size-fits-all. But there is something that happens in the spiritual realm—a mystery beyond our understanding. Or as Jesus puts it,

"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."

Staring into the mystery of all this Nicodemus says, *"How can these things be?"* He cannot see it yet. The night is still too dark.

Jesus answers him and gives him some ribbing: *"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?"*

The answer, my friend,' as someone put it in Bible study this week, 'is blowing in the wind.'

The Life-saving Antidote

But let's talk about life and death, Nicodemus. A rabbi spends hours throughout a lifetime searching the ancient scripture for all that can be gleaned from the sacred words about life and death, and life after death. We all think about these things from time to time. But for Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, it is on his mind most of the time. Jesus says,

"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."

Now Jesus is referring to the Book of Numbers to a time when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness for those forty years:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and

they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

Nicodemus, can you see it now? The antidote to death stands in front of you.

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.

And then Jesus himself delivers the good news:

"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. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the Messiah. This is the antidote to that terminal snakebite, which happened all the way back in the Garden of Eden.

Do you see now Nicodemus? Do you see Jesus? What do you see when you look at Jesus? Do you hear the wind of the Spirit stirring in the air?

Does It Matter?

So what then? What if there is belief. What if the Spirit of God comes to you like the wind and catches you. What changes? Does it matter? What difference in our lives will it make? Who can say? God will move how God moves. But this is what happens with Nicodemus later in the Gospel of John:

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (John 19: 38-42)

It's Lent. It's time for reckoning. An encounter with Jesus can profoundly change a life. When you look at Jesus what is it that you see? Amen.