

“The Teacher of Israel”

Genesis 12:1-4a • Psalm 121 • Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 • John 3:1-17

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Mason, Michigan

March 5, 2023

Second Sunday in Lent

Our scripture readings are especially rich today. We’ve got Abraham’s decision to leave his homeland for a completely unknown land solely on the basis of his trust in God, a wonderful poem about what it means that God is our “help”; Paul’s incredibly insightful commentary on Abraham’s faith when he “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and a reading from John’s Gospel which contains what is probably the best-known verse in the entire Bible. I could spend an hour talking about the beauties of these passages. But I don’t have an hour. Three years ago, facing these same set of passages, I chose to focus on Abraham. Today, I’m going to talk about Nicodemus.

“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.” The Pharisees were a group within Judaism that espoused a distinctive set of teachings. The Pharisees were particularly well-versed in the Law of Moses, the 613 commandments in the books of Genesis to Deuteronomy. They also observed additional practices that had been passed down orally for many generations and were believed to also come from Moses. Pharisees were well-respected by the common Jewish people. They valued education, learning, and democratic principles. They were considered *wise*.

“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.” Nicodemus appears only in John’s Gospel; he is mentioned in no other historical source. He was “a leader of the Jews;” indeed, it appears from chapter 7 of John’s Gospel that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, which was comprised of about 70 leading rabbis, and which met together to discuss important matters affecting the Jewish people and to make decisions in cases over which they had jurisdiction. The land was under Roman administration, but the Romans didn’t want to have to deal with all the various cases that came up among the common people, so they let the Sanhedrin have some authority over local matters, so long as their deliberations did not impact the balance of power.

So Nicodemus was an educated, respected, and powerful rabbi. “He came to Jesus by night.” It’s dark outside, but it’s also dark inside the mind of Nicodemus. He hasn’t yet seen the light.

Nicodemus said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” Nicodemus approaches Jesus with a great deal of respect; he calls him *rabbi*, “teacher.” Not just any rabbi, but a rabbi who has come *from God*, a rabbi who can perform remarkable *signs*. Just prior to this story, John said that Jesus was “in Jerusalem during the Passover festival” and that “many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.” We’re talking about miracles. Healings. Up in Galilee, at a wedding, Jesus had turned water into wine. “No one,” Nicodemus says, “can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” Nicodemus may be in the dark, but he’s not *completely* in the dark. He’s curious.

Inquisitive. He senses that there's something *special* about Jesus. He's not just any *ordinary* rabbi.

Jesus replies: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Here is your first Greek lesson for the day. The words "from above" come from the Greek word *anōthen*. *Anōthen* has two possible meanings. It can either mean "from above," as in "from a higher place;" or it can mean "from the beginning," as in "over again," or "anew." So depending on which translation you read, Jesus either says that no one can see the kingdom of God without being *born from above*, or without being *born again*. Nicodemus thinks Jesus means the latter. Specifically, he thinks Jesus is saying that one literally has to be born *a second time*. So he says: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus elaborates: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." *Water* and *Spirit*. That's a way of referring to the Sacrament of Baptism.

Jesus continues: "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." What is *spiritual* is spiritual because it is *of the Spirit*. Jesus is talking about a rebirth, a baptism, of *Spirit*. He's not talking about being *born*, in a fleshly sense, the way we all were born from the wombs of our mothers. He's talking about being *born*, in a spiritual sense, with eyes and heart and mind *awakened* to something that we cannot see or touch, but we can *feel* in the very core of our being.

"Do not be astonished," continues Jesus, "that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'" Here is your second Greek lesson for today. When Jesus says "You must be born from above," the word "you" is in the plural form. Our English word "you" could be either singular or plural – it can refer to one person, or to a group of people, depending on the context. In Greek, there were different forms of the word "you." This one is plural. Jesus isn't talking to Nicodemus. He's talking to *everyone*. To *anyone*, in *any* time or place, who reads this Gospel or hears these words. "You" – *all of you* – *every single last one of you* – "must be born from above." Or: you – *all of you* – "must be born *anew*."

He continues: "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." Here is your third Greek lesson for today: the word "wind" is the same word as the word for "Spirit." *Pneuma*. In Hebrew, *ru'ah*. Wind. Spirit. Breath. The *wind* blows where it chooses; the *Spirit* blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it – now the word "you" is singular; Jesus is talking just to *Nicodemus* here – *Nicodemus* hears the sound of it, *he sees the signs that Jesus is doing*, but he does not know where it comes from or where it goes. "So it is," says Jesus, "with everyone who is born of the Spirit." They move where the Spirit moves them.

But Nicodemus hasn't yet been born of the Spirit. He is still in the dark. "How," he asks Jesus, "can these things be?" And Jesus replies: "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" Nicodemus is one of the most educated, respected, and powerful rabbis in all of Israel. There are not many people in Judaism – if any! – wiser than he is. And he's *clueless*. Everything he knows about the Law of Moses, everything he knows about the Jewish oral tradition that had been faithfully passed down for generations – it's all useless. Meaningless ... without the *Spirit*.

"Very truly, I tell you," says Jesus (and the "you" is singular here), "we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you" – *plural* "you" – do not receive our testimony." Most of the Jews in the time of Jesus did not accept what he had to say, did not believe in who he was. Some did. They were the minority. "If I have told you" – *plural* "you" – "about earthly things and you" – *plural* – "do not believe, how can you" – *plural* – "believe if I tell you" – *plural* – "about heavenly things?" He's talking to the Jews back then; he's talking to all of us today; *is anybody listening?* Jesus may not be as

well educated as Nicodemus, or as respected, or as powerful, but *he speaks Truth*. Will you believe?

“No one,” says Jesus, “has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” He’s anticipating his resurrection and ascension here; he’s also referring back to his incarnation, as the pre-existent Word of God who “became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” He is the Son of God; he is also the Son of Man, the Messiah prophesied in the book of Daniel. He came from heaven in the beginning; he will go back to heaven in the end. No other rabbi – not even Nicodemus! – has ever done *that*.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” says Jesus, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” He’s referring to a story in the book of Numbers. When the Israelites were in their forty-year sojourn through the wilderness following their escape from slavery in Egypt, there was a time when they were afflicted by poisonous serpents. God told Moses to make an image of a serpent and set it on a pole, “and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So just as Moses lifted up that serpent in the wilderness, so must Jesus be lifted up, on the cross, where he won for us our salvation, “that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Eternal life is not a given. It is not a gift granted to everybody. But it is a gift that God grants to those who look up to Jesus, enthroned on high.

You all know this next verse. “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.” Here is your fourth and final Greek lesson for the day. We’re not sure if these are words that Jesus said to Nicodemus, or if they are John the Gospel writer’s own words, spoken directly to those who read or hear this book. There were no quotation marks in Greek; we don’t know where Jesus’s words end and John’s words begin. Not that it matters. The message is the same, regardless of whether Jesus said them to Nicodemus, or whether John is saying them to all of us. *God loved the world*. God *really* loved the world. God loved the world *so much* that he gave his *only* Son. He gave Jesus to us in his incarnation, his birth; he gave Jesus to us again in his death, his ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. This was the means whereby God set about to abolish everything that was wrong in the world. Sin, death, and evil – *Jesus is the answer to it all*. Do you believe that? I hope so! For “everyone who believes in him [will] not perish but [will] have eternal life!” You don’t have to be held captive by the ungodly forces that ravage this world and seek to do you harm. You can have *freedom*. The best kind of freedom. *Freedom to life!*

“Indeed,” wraps up Jesus, or John, or both, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Do not think for a minute – *do not think for even a second!* – that God sent Jesus here to do people *harm*. Jesus did not come here to condemn people, to point fingers and place blame. Christianity, unfortunately, does far too much of that. Jesus did not come to condemn. Jesus came to *save*. Really. Truly. To *save*.

So what happened to Nicodemus? He appears twice more in the Gospel story. In chapter 7, Nicodemus does not join his fellow Pharisees in passing judgment on Jesus. He wants them instead to give Jesus a fair hearing. And in chapter 19, after Jesus has been crucified, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea take the body, wrap it with linen cloths and about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes (that Nicodemus himself had donated), and lay it in a tomb. John reminds us that Nicodemus “had first come to Jesus by night.” It’s not night for Nicodemus anymore. Somewhere along the way, he saw the light. Many branches of the Church recognize that fact; they commemorate Nicodemus as a saint. He thus is an example for us of who we might all be: someone who’s not entirely sure about Jesus at first, and who, over time, comes to *believe*. Truly, Nicodemus has been born ... *again*.

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