

“The Teacher of Israel”

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John 3:1-17

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Second Sunday in Lent

Today’s Gospel reading is the first of four very special stories that are found only in the Gospel according to John. All four focus in on one particular individual who has a unique encounter with Jesus that leaves them permanently changed. Between now and Palm Sunday we will be considering all four.

Today’s story is about a man named Nicodemus. John tells us that he is “a Pharisee.” The Pharisees were a group within Judaism that taught a particular interpretation of the Jewish Law. Not only did they meticulously observe the Law of Moses – the 613 commandments that can be found in the books of Genesis to Deuteronomy – they also observed additional practices that had been passed down orally for many generations and that were believed to also come from Moses. Pharisees were well-educated. They were well-respected by the common Jewish people. They were considered wise.

John also tells that Nicodemus is “a leader of the Jews.” Later on, in chapter 7, we see that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, which was comprised of about 70 leading rabbis. This council met 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. Nicodemus was a member of this council.

This educated, respected, leading rabbi, “came to Jesus by night.” He goes to talk with Jesus under the cover of darkness. He has questions he wants to ask. But he wants to ask them discretely. This meeting happens clandestinely. But the darkness is also symbolic, because Nicodemus has not yet seen the light. He says 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 tremendous amount of respect. He addresses him as “rabbi” and calls him “a teacher.” He recognizes that Jesus has the ability to perform “signs.” John tells us 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.” Healings. Miracles. Nicodemus must have witnessed some of those. Unlike his fellow Pharisees, Nicodemus realizes what this *means*. “No one,” he says to Jesus, “can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” Nicodemus is not completely in the dark. He rightly perceives that there is something very *special* about Jesus. That Jesus wields the power of *God*. That God is *with* Jesus.

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

anóthen. *Anóthen* has two different meanings. It can either mean “from above,” as in “from a higher place;” or it can mean “from the beginning,” as in “over again.” So depending on which translation you read, Jesus says that no one can see the kingdom of God without either being *born from above*, or 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*. He doesn’t understand. So he asks: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus responds: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” It’s not really an answer to Nicodemus’s question; it’s more of an elaboration. Jesus is saying that being “born from above” or being “born again” has something to do with *water* and *Spirit*. The water is the water of baptism. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus continues: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” We are all born of the flesh. We all come into this earth from the wombs of our mothers. Jesus himself has taken on human flesh. But being born of the Spirit is something different. It’s a different kind of birth. It’s a birth that involves our heart and mind awakened to something that we cannot see or touch, but that we can *feel* deep in our *soul*.

“Do not be astonished,” Jesus says, “that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’” Here is your second Greek lesson for today. When he says “You must be born from above,” the word “you” is in the plural form. *He is talking to more than one person*. Our English word “you” can 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. So Jesus isn’t just talking to Nicodemus. He’s talking to *everyone*. To anyone 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.”

Jesus 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: the word “wind” is the same as the word for “Spirit.” *Pneuma*. In Hebrew, *ru’ah*. Wind. Spirit. Breath. The wind blows where it wills; the Spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it – you, *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 yet understand how Jesus has this power. That’s why he is having this conversation with Jesus. “So it is,” says Jesus, “with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” They go where the Spirit leads them. And *something* has led Nicodemus to have this conversation with Jesus. Something ... *spiritual*.

Nicodemus is astonished. “How,” he asks Jesus, “can these things be?” Nicodemus had been trained to *follow the Law*. The teachings. The ordinances. He is beginning to realize: there’s something *more* to a life of faith than just following a set of rules, no matter how inspired they might be. There’s another *dimension* to it. Jesus replies: “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Nicodemus is one of the most educated and respected rabbis in all of Israel. He is coming to realize that everything he knows about the Jewish laws and traditions that had been faithfully passed down from generation to generation – *it’s not enough*. It’s all *meaningless*, without the Spirit.

“Very truly, I tell you,” says Jesus (the “you” is singular here), “we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you” – *plural* – do not receive our testimony.” Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, but he’s talking *about* all the people Nicodemus represents, all the religious people who are more interested in *traditions* and *rules* than in *spirituality* and *faith*. There is a very important lesson for us here: Christianity is *not* – *should not be!* – about *traditions* and *rules*. It’s about *spirituality*

and *faith*. Let us not make the mistake that Nicodemus's colleagues were making. Jesus continues: "If I have told you" – plural – "about earthly things and you" – plural – "do not believe, how can you" – plural – "believe if I tell you" – plural – "about heavenly things?" Now Jesus is talking to *everyone*, to all of us!

Jesus continues: "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." He is talking about his ascension to heaven, which will happen after his resurrection, and his descent from heaven, his incarnation, when the divine Word took on human flesh. He came from heaven in the beginning; he will go back to heaven in the end. No one else 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." In the book of Numbers, when the Israelites were in the wilderness following their escape from slavery, there was a period 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." (Numbers 21:8) Moses lifted that serpent up in the wilderness, and people lived. In the same way, Jesus will be lifted up on a cross, and people will live, because "whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

The next verse should sound familiar. "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 words, intended for those who read this book. There were no quotation marks in Greek; we don't know where Jesus's words end and the writer's words begin. Not that it matters. The message is the same, regardless of whether Jesus or John said it. God *loved* the world. God loved the world *so much* that he gave his most precious gift, 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. The purpose was to give us *life*. "Everyone who believes in him [will] not perish but [will] have eternal life!"

The next verse is just as important. It needs to *always* be attached to the previous verse. "Indeed," says John, or Jesus, or perhaps 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." *Jesus did not come here to condemn the world*. Do you see the implications of this? *Jesus did not come here to condemn*. It's not our job as Christians to consign other people to the pits of hell. It's our job as Christians to spread Christ's *love*.

So what ultimately happened to Nicodemus? The conversation between him and Jesus ends without a clear resolution. Did he get his questions answered? Did he come to believe? 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 to give Jesus a fair hearing instead. And in chapter 19, after Jesus has been crucified, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea wrap the body with linen cloths and about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, that Nicodemus himself had donated. Then, together, they lay the body in a tomb. John reminds us that Nicodemus "had first come to Jesus by night." It's not night for Nicodemus anymore. Through that conversation with Jesus and his subsequent reflections, Nicodemus had a spiritual awakening. He had come to see the light. He had been born "a second time," born *from above*, born *anew*, born *again*. Many branches of the Christian Church recognize this truth; they commemorate Nicodemus as a saint. He thus is an example of who we all might be: someone who, at first, isn't entirely sure about Jesus, and who, over time, and with the help of the Spirit, comes to believe.

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