

WE MUST BE BORN FROM ABOVE

JOHN 3:1-17 MARCH 10, 2024

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The main part of this morning's gospel text is the story about Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night to seek some information as to what his message is really all about. But we need to remember that this is not just any ordinary person coming at night. Nicodemus is a prominent Pharisee, even a "*ruler of the Jews.*"

That such a prominent, knowledgeable person is in the posture of a student or inquirer is interesting. Throughout John's Gospel, many will be befuddled by Jesus, wondering, "*Who is this?*" In this passage we move from mysterious and wonderful "*signs*" performed by Jesus to definite words spoken by Jesus. And yet the meaning of the words will not be self-evident and even knowledgeable.

Nicodemus will be confused by much that Jesus has to say to him. Not what one might expect from a well-informed "*teacher of Israel.*" But the truth of the matter is that we come like Nicodemus today to Jesus asking about what Jesus is really all about.

Before we get into the conversation with Jesus and Nicodemus let us do a little Bible Study.

There is this strange talk about the snake lifted up in the wilderness. What is that all about? It is referring to Numbers 21:4-9. This passage in Numbers tells about the journey of the Israelites in the wilderness and how the people murmured and complained and even regretted the day they had left Egypt. To punish them God sent a plague of deadly snakes and soon the people repented and pleaded for mercy. So, God told Moses to make an image of a serpent and hold it up and all who looked at it were healed. Later in Hezekiah we read where the people began worshiped the image of the serpent as a God and it had to be destroyed.

John took that old story and used it as a kind of parable of Jesus. He says: "*The serpent was lifted up; men looked at it; their thoughts were turned to God and by the power of that God in whom they trusted they were healed. Even so Jesus must be lifted up; and when men turned their thoughts to him, and believe in him, they too will be healed.*" And of course, the cross was the reference to being lifted up.

But then the talk becomes even more strange as Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of "*eternal life*" and the "*world.*" The "*world*" in John's Gospel is a place of confused darkness into which the light shines, the realm of rejection where "*his own receive him not*" (John 1:11)

You heard the story. He came to Jesus in the dark of night, this Nicodemus, maybe because he didn't want anybody to see him conversing with this supposed rabbi, Jesus. After all, Nicodemus was an important, powerful, prestigious "*ruler of the synagogue,*" leader of the faith. Nicodemus was one who could be counted on the let you know if you were keeping all the laws that were prescribed for the Jewish people by the Scribes. How would it look for him to be seen seated at the feet of a mere rural rabbi?

"Jesus, we know you're a prophet. We know nobody could do what you do if God was not

with him. We know....”

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, is big on knowing. That’s what keeps powerful, prestigious people in power. They’re in the know.

“Jesus, we know....” And Jesus cuts off Nicodemus’ midsentence with the words, “You’ve got to be born again from top to bottom!” “You must be born from ABOVE.”

One conversation with Jesus and Nicodemus goes from being very confident to befuddlement: “How can a grownup reenter the womb, and be born again?” “You must be born from above.

Nicodemus does not understand and Jesus responds with some explanation of how the wind does its thing.

Jesus replies, “The *pneuma* blows where it will. You can hear it, but not initiate, contain, control it.” Pneuma is the same word for “wind” and “spirit”. We can see its affects and feel the power of it but it is a mystery as to how it really works.

Nicodemus becomes even more confused: “What? Jesus, are you using *pneuma* in the ordinary sense of ‘wind’ or are you using *pneuma* in the sense of ‘Spirit’?”

Jesus replies, “How is it possible for somebody as smart as you to be so dumb? Nobody has ever seen heaven, except the Son of Man. Moses lifted up a snake in the wilderness. Be saved. Believe. Eternal life!”

And knowledgeable Nicodemus is reduced to dumb silence.

“How can this be?” asks Nicodemus.

“The Spirit blows where it wants. Even somebody as old as you, can be born again. Not something you do (what did you do to get born the first time?). It’s something the Holy Spirit will do to you. Born again.” Or he put it even better when we said we must be born from above. Our old self must be made new.

And it was then that we learned the power of Jesus’s statement that he made in another gospel, “You can’t enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless you turn and become as a little child.” Or, as John might put it, “must be born again, from above.”

Really, this statement of Jesus to Nicodemus should not have been that much of a surprise to him. Ezekiel, for instance, had spoken repeatedly about the new heart that must be created in man. ³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

And later Ezekiel said: “A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put in you.”

Nicodemus was an expert in scripture and time and time again the prophets had spoken about the same experience that Jesus was speaking about. The most famous story was found in the story of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 where you recall these words: The Valley of Dry Bones

1The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3He said to me,

"Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

7So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

My friends, we never become so adept at living the Christian life, so skilled at being the Body of Christ, that we outgrow our need for rebirth in the Spirit. With a living God, there's always room for rebirth and surprising manifestations of the Spirit that bring us new life and fresh possibility. For all of us, Jesus invites us, promises us that we'll be born again.

To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to be willing to have our categories redefined, our "God boxes" dismantled, to be blown by the Spirit into places one would never have dreamed of going. As Jesus put it to Nicodemus, to be a child of God, born of the Spirit, is to "come to the light," even when it shines outside the mirrored boxes where we thought we had all the reflections of God's truth trapped.

A well-known theologian told in a lecture of a conversation he had with a woman whose husband had died some months before, leaving her in profound grief. She reported that her sorrow was the deepest late in the afternoon when she would sit at home and gaze out the window toward the street. She would look out toward the corner where her husband used to appear after a day's work, his coat over his arm, slapping his leg with the evening paper as he walked. "He would stop when he thought I couldn't see him," she remembered, "and knock out his pipe. He knew I didn't want him to smoke so much, although I kept sewing up the holes in his coat pockets." The memory was bittersweet. "That time of day is a terrible one for me to get through," she said, "because I know he won't come around the corner anymore. In heaven do you suppose he and I will live together in a cottage with a white fence?"

You might be surprised by the theologian's verdict on her question? "This was pathetic," he said. "I appreciate the woman's grief, but I can't say, 'Yes, yes, in heaven that's the way it's going to be.' That would be a lie. . . That is simply not true to the Christian faith." In other words, "O, my dear," the theologian was saying, "How can this be?"

But how does he know? Is the woman's picture of heaven so different from Jesus' own promise that "in my Father's house there are many dwelling places"? Perhaps behind the quaint images of a cottage and a white fence and a woman waiting for the husband she loved with all her heart, once again is the hunger for a love that death cannot destroy, a meaning that separation cannot take away, a light that the darkness of grief cannot quench, and a God

whose life-giving grace cannot be contained by any human definition of what is possible, even a theologian's. The

wind blows where it will Nicodemus; the wind blows where it will.

Joseph R. Jeter Jr., in his book, Re/Membering: Meditations and Sermons for the Table of Jesus Christ, relays this movement of the spirit. He writes:

"I remember the time years ago when I was in worship in a Roman Catholic church. When it was time to come forward to receive the Eucharist, the priest invited all of us, Catholic and non-Catholic, to come forward. We were surprised at the invitation, but many of us went forward and knelt at the rail. I put out my hands as I saw others do, and, when the priest came to me, I looked up at him. I saw the sweat pouring from his face and realized the risk he had taken to invite me there. At that moment the risk of Jesus and our faith came clear in a way it had not done before. How many have risked that much that we might receive the blessings of God?"

In the early days of the AIDS epidemic, one of New York City's most courageous and tireless workers against the disease was a physician by the name of Joyce Wallace. To help stem the tide of the virus, Dr. Wallace allowed herself to be blown by the wind of the Spirit in new directions; she followed the light of God into dark places, not only treating infected patients but also cruising the West Side of Manhattan in a specially equipped medical van, paying prostitutes \$20 to be tested on the spot for AIDS. Though she experienced the skepticism of her medical colleagues and the daily disappointments of seeing patient after patient die, she refused to be dissuaded from her mission or confined by the conventional definitions of what was possible.

In fact, she drew inspiration in this breaking of the boundaries from her mother, a teacher of brain-injured children. One particularly powerful memory was when her mother had her class stage a production of *My Fair Lady*, and she gave the lead role to a little girl in a wheelchair. It never occurred to her mother, reported Dr. Wallace, that the audience, so conditioned by life's boundaries of possible and impossible, would weep when the little girl rolled herself across the stage singing, *"I could have danced all night."*

"If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe," Jesus asked Nicodemus, *"how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"* Jesus was not moving Nicodemus toward a new theology, but toward a new life, a new way of wonder. The point was not for Nicodemus to replace his little theological boxes with slightly larger versions, but to fall on his knees in repentance, to beg God for forgiveness for all arrogant thinking, and then to be carried along by the Spirit's breeze into a life not of his own making.

There is a place, of course, for doctrine, for thinking seriously about God and life, for theological categories, but only when tempered by humility, by the realization that all of our thoughts about God are halting attempts to come in wonder and worship to the blazing light of God.

So, what of Nicodemus? We see him again, of course, this time not at the beginning of

John's Gospel but at the end of it. Jesus is dead, crucified, and there is Nicodemus. This time, however, he comes not as an interrogator but as a disciple, not as an apostle of the night but a follower of the light. Now, he does not say, "*We know.*"

Indeed, he says nothing; he simply comes, bearing spices of worship and praise and hope, whose aroma will be carried by the wind that blows where it will.

My friends, *Mystery is not an argument for the existence of God; mystery is an experience of the existence of God.*"

We never become so adept at living the Christian life, so skilled at being the Body of Christ, that we outgrow our need for rebirth in the Spirit. With a living God, there's always room for rebirth and surprising manifestations of the Spirit that bring us new life and fresh possibility. For all of us, Jesus invites us, promises us that we'll be born again from ABOVE.

Will you accept that invitation?