

John 3:1-17

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

3:2 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 unless God is with that person."

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

3:4 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?"

3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

3:8 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."

3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

3:11 "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.

3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:16 "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.

3:17 "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.

Sermon: A Nighttime Visit:

Imagine a righteous man. Really, he's righteous. And sincere. And disciplined. And devout. He's read the scriptures. He clings to Torah, the good parts of Torah. He's spent a lifetime seeking to find the presence of God in the written Word of God.

Over the past seven centuries, four foreign powers – the Babylonians, and then the Persians, and then the Greeks, and eventually the Romans – have sacked his homeland, and forced assimilation upon his people. And little by little, the God of Moses has been watered down, and it seems his God, our God, is barely recognizable.

This man, Nicodemus, and others like him, the Pharisees, seek to set themselves apart. They cling to the laws, customs, and traditions that God has given Israel through Moses. And you should see the Pharisees interspersed in the middle of Greek culture. They are conspicuous. But

they are also appreciated by the locals. The Pharisees differ from the Sadducees, the descendants of the High Priest Zadok, the ones who lord their priestly privileges over others. Pharisees are not noble by blood, but rather noble by action. Pharisees earnestly seek after God in their every action. And Nicodemus is their leader.

One Passover season, Nicodemus learns of a Galilean teacher named Jesus. Jesus has performed healings and miracles. And just the other day, Jesus cleansed the Temple. Nicodemus is smart enough to know that Jesus is not an ordinary man – something God-infused is happening right here and right now. Nicodemus is curious. He wants to meet Jesus. He's got questions to ask Jesus.

But if the Pharisees have a fault, it's this: their rigor in following the law can sometimes make them blind to common sense, or insensitive to the changing needs of the world. Sometimes, they pursue a law over its intent, and sometimes, this sought-after separation has an opposite effect: God is no longer exclusive, but instead, God becomes elusive.

Nicodemus seeks Jesus in night-time cover. It's probably best not to be seen together in public. After all, Nicodemus is learned, and devout, and respected. And Jesus, well Jesus, is a wild card. You never know what kind of company he'll keep, and you never know what controversial lesson he'll teach.

Nicodemus asks Jesus, "Hey man, what's your deal? How is God working through you?"

Jesus says, "If you want to experience the truth, you need to be born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus is confused. “I am an old man. And I know God can do a lot of things, but I’m not sure sending me back through my mother’s womb a second time is one of them.”

Jesus says, “I’m not talking about a physical rebirth. I’m talking about a spiritual birth.”

“I still don’t follow,” says Nicodemus.

“You’re a smart man, Nicodemus,” says Jesus, “But you are being obtuse. You know Torah, but you don’t experience it. You live it out as if it’s an instruction manual that will create carbon copies of God’s people and God’s possibilities. And you act as if God can only be revealed within your specific framework, within your specific formulas and comprehensions.”

“But here’s the deal. God has SO much depth. God is revealed in me and through me. God has come to tell the world that God is available to all who will acknowledge me. For in knowing me, and in experiencing me, you also know God. And in knowing God, you are quite literally born again. Your spirit is no longer beholden, held captive to the systems of this world. Instead, your spirit is invited to enter a new life, a new world, where God is accessible, and where God understands the human experience, because God has lived it.”

“And one more thing. God did not send me here to condemn. God sent me here to love. And in that love, God shows how one can turn away from the destructive habits of this world – hate, greed, apathy – and turn toward the regenerative habits of God’s world: hope, kindness, empathy.”

The text doesn’t tell us, but Nicodemus’ nighttime visit isn’t likely to provide an immediate light to his faith. Nicodemus most likely leaves this encounter confused. But don’t be too hard on Nicodemus. It’s not so

easy to be born of the spirit. It's not so easy, because it's not about how smart you are, or about how hard you prepare, or how hard you work, or how many pieces of scripture you memorize, or who your parents are, or what it says on your birth certificate. Being born of the spirit is not something that we can plan or pre-ordain.

Instead, being born of the spirit requires us to be vulnerable. And it's something that requires us to not only intuit, but to also feel. And it requires us to just let things happen. And we never know when the moment will strike.

And if we are a man like Nicodemus, a spirited, purposeful experience may not be something that happens in a lightning-strike moment. Too often we remember Paul, or the Centurion, or the Blind Man, characters whose faith changed in a flash.

But for others, the coming to faith is an arduous process. It was for the disciples. And they had front row seats and private lessons. Only after Jesus is gone do they realize in whose presence they have been. And John Wesley spends the better part of his twenties seeking assurance. "Why won't it find me, he wonders?" Until one night, while walking along Aldersgate his heart is strangely warmed.

I believe our story leaves Nicodemus somewhere along the path between doubt and belief. Nicodemus wants to embrace the truth Jesus proclaims, but he is hesitant to abandon the comfort he finds in the smaller truths of this world. Nicodemus is a timid seeker. He is a baby bird. He knows flight is possible, but he lacks confidence in his own wings. Therefore, Nicodemus hovers.

John's is a gospel of process. Every person, whether we are a character in the story, or someone recounting the story to a friend, or even someone

hearing the story for the first time, seeks to discover who Jesus is, and allows the divine reality to transform our very being. Sometimes this process is as quick as a conversation at the well. At other times, this process may stretch an entire afternoon. And in still other instances, this process takes shape across the whole of the story. Sometimes, it takes the hearing of this Gospel over and over again.

To read John's gospel is to engage in a faithful process. To read John's gospel is to hear confirmation that Jesus lived and dwelled and still lives and dwells among us. To read John's gospel is to hear how the story transformed and still transforms the lives of others. And to read John's gospel is to place ourselves into the story, to be people who experience the presence of God.

Our text, and indeed the whole of John's gospel, begs an important question. Where are we today? Are we ready to experience the light of God in full light? Or do we prefer to linger in the moonlight a little while longer?

Scholar Douglas John Hall reminds us that God's truth is not something we can hold onto. Rather, God's truth has a hold on us. Friends, whether we are lingering in the light, or dancing in the dark, may God's truth grab hold of us tight in this Lenten season. And when it gets a hold of us, may we bring it to our tables. Lord knows we could all use a second helping.

May it be so. Amen.