

John 3:1-17 – Lent 2 – Heavenly Things – March 5, 2023

+In Nomine Iesu+

This year, in our lectionary readings, the Gospel readings mostly come from Matthew. You have probably noticed this. We heard Matthew's account of the temptation just last week. But here, during the Lenten and Easter season, several of our readings will come from John's Gospel. And I think we get some time with him because his Gospel so clearly points us to Christ's passion.

Now, I still hold that John should get his own year. I am lobbying for a four-year lectionary—based on the four gospels. There are so many wonderful readings from John that never make it to our Sunday services. But, sadly, I have no influence over such decisions in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Although some time we are just going to spend a whole year in John.

Now, let me begin with a little background. John begins his Gospel with a sophisticated theology of the incarnation. John makes grand claims about Jesus. Jesus was with God in the beginning. Through Jesus, the Word of God, all creation was made. Jesus was, is, and always will be God Almighty.

And Jesus became one of us, taking on human flesh. Jesus is true life and true light. And although men love darkness, all who believe in Jesus, through the saving will of the Father, are declared to be children of God.

The first chapter of John's gospel is poetic and beautiful and deeply theological. And in all of this, John introduces us to Jesus. And all of these historic accounts that John will recount to us, are written so that we will "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

And it is in this context we find our Gospel reading. It is hard to say exactly why Nicodemus came to Jesus that night. Most think that he came at night so that he could do so secretly; so that no one would notice. He was a prominent religious scholar. Everyone would have considered him an intelligent, sophisticated, and well-educated man. Jesus even calls him "the teacher" of Israel.

Nicodemus is probably still what we would call a skeptic. He is deeply religious, but that is far different than trusting in Jesus Christ for what He has come to do. He is not at all sure what to do with Jesus. He doesn't know what to make of Jesus. It is a problem in the world today too. Although Nicodemus is doing something about it, while most do not. They go on as if Jesus' coming doesn't matter at all.

But even among skeptics, there are honest skeptics and dishonest skeptics. An honest skeptic is one who may have doubts or questions about certain truths or doctrines. And yet, he is looking for answers. He is willing to wrestle with the evidence. An honest sceptic is willing to admit that he is wrong—when he is wrong—and hear correction from the Scriptures.

A dishonest skeptic is something entirely different. A dishonest skeptic is one who has doubts and questions about certain truths or doctrines, but is not willing to listen to any answers. He is not interested in the facts. He only desires to be heard—to show his own

cleverness. And even when one of his false ideas is uncovered, he just goes off and looks for another false idea.

So what kind of sceptic is Nicodemus? There are aspects of this conversation with Jesus that make us suspect that Nicodemus' motives aren't perfect. He may have been there with his great intellect to tie Jesus in a theological knot. Perhaps he even thinks that Jesus is absurd—that He is a problem for the Pharisees. I am not sure he came to listen, although that is what he ended up doing.

That being said, he doesn't come criticizing and complaining. He keeps our Lenten discipline, if you know what I mean. In fact, he calls Jesus *Rabbi—Teacher*. This is a term of respect—whether he meant it or not. He even says that Jesus is a teacher that has come from God. So, I think there is reason to give him the benefit of the doubt.

And even his visit at night suggests some degree of authenticity. He visits under the cover of darkness. Sure, he doesn't want others to know that he is there. He might even be a little embarrassed by the whole thing. But he goes to Jesus anyway. You might even say that the Spirit has beckoned him there.

Regardless, Jesus, being Jesus, plunges right into the heart of the issue for Nicodemus. And, in fact, he plunges right into the heart of our issue as well. Jesus says, "Truly, Truly—literally 'amen, amen'—I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is blind to the Kingdom of God—He is spiritually dead. He needs a new birth before He can understand the ways and thoughts of God.

Paul points us to the problem in 1 Corinthians 2, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

And Peter points us to the remedy in 1 Peter 1, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Now, as I have suggested, Nicodemus is an intelligent, sophisticated, even religious man. But Jesus says that is not enough. Degrees and status and popularity will not get you into the kingdom of God. And you can almost hear the sarcasm in Nicodemus' voice, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Now Nicodemus knew his Greek. He knew that the word in our English Bibles translated as "born again" may also be translated "born from above." And here, we are closer to the meaning. Jesus is not saying what Nicodemus ridiculously suggests. Jesus is not suggesting a return to the womb. And Jesus is not suggesting that he just needs to decide to follow Jesus.

He is saying that it takes a miracle to believe. The change which Jesus intends is not something superficial. It is not just a new idea—or a moral change—or an outward alteration of life. It is a thorough change of mind, will, character. It is a resurrection. A new heart. A new creation. It is passing from death to life. And here, for someone who doesn't

even realize that he is dead. Jesus must first convince Nicodemus that he is not in the faith, before He draws him in.

Now, it is in this context that we get the world's most famous Bible verse. But, I think *we* mostly have heard it as a sound bite. We've lost the context. This verse comes in the middle of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, and we have heard part of that conversation this morning.

And, again, this phrase "born again" is one small part of their conversation. And if we were to pay attention to the context, Jesus explains exactly what He means by "born again" or "born from above."

And so, before we get to the good news of God's love for the world, and eternal life, Jesus talks about the working of the Spirit. To be born from above is regeneration, and it is the work of the Holy Spirit. New birth is the work of God, not of human decision. And this regeneration comes through the Holy Spirit working according to His will—and according to His Word.

Our own Lutheran Confessions say it this way, "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, when and where it pleases God, in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. This happens not through our own merits, but for Christ's sake."

We don't need Jesus to come into our lives, we need Jesus to bring us into His. We don't need to commit ourselves to Jesus, we need to be brought to life in His promises. We aren't born again by our own decision, we are born from above by His decision. And notice Jesus ties this new birth to Baptism. We must be born of water and the Spirit. God's grace and God's Spirit are given through Baptism. And Baptism is the work of God.

It is only after Jesus firmly fixes the kingdom of God, eternal life, and regeneration in the hands and will of God, that He tells Nicodemus to believe. "As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

Here is the Word of God, through which the Spirit works. The Gospel here is Jesus exalted on the cross. And Jesus makes this connection to the wilderness wanderings. Apart from the bronze snake on a pole that God gave to the people, the fatally bitten Israelite had no possibility of healing. In the same way, apart from the crucified Christ, there is no possibility of salvation or eternal life. And it is as the church tells the story of what God has done for us in Jesus, that the Spirit works regeneration.

And this is where we leave poor Nicodemus the skeptic, at least for the moment. We don't immediately hear how he responds to all of this. He is entirely quiet after verse nine.

But John gives us two other glimpses of the man. Once he defends Jesus in front of his fellow Pharisees. He asks, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" And then finally we meet Nicodemus on Good Friday. While most of Jesus' disciples are in hiding, Nicodemus sees to the burial of Jesus' body.

Apparently, he was no longer a skeptic, but a believer, a disciple. To use Nicodemus' own language, he had been born again. To use Jesus' words, he had been born from above, as the Holy Spirit worked through the Word of God. And that same Word and Spirit are at work in this place today.

Now, I have mostly just told the story of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus today—with a little commentary mixed in. And I think this story gives us a sense in how God works in the world in regeneration. The Holy Spirit at work in Holy Baptism—at work in the Word. Salvation is His business.

We even hear the Gospel from Jesus Himself—as God loves the world in a particular way—in the cross of Jesus Christ. These are the heavenly things that Jesus came to proclaim—and to achieve. And they sort of force our hands.

Now that Jesus has come, His presence in the world demands a reaction. We shouldn't be able to leave here indifferent to the things of God. Bored with church and ready for lunch. We should be troubled by all of this, in a sense. And amazed. Nicodemus' question is a good one, "How can these things be?" Let's be thinking about such things today. And may the changes that God works in the life of Nicodemus be present in our experience as well. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+