

Untitled
John 3:1-17
March 8, 2020 (Lent 2A)
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John 3:1-17

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

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 apart from the presence of God."

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 a 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.

Nicodemus does a number of things right.

[I hesitate to start a sermon that way, because it sounds an awful lot like those times when folks butter us up in preparation for a bite.]

Nicodemus does a number of things right.

He goes to Jesus, directly. He does not have others do his bidding. So he's got that going for him.

He enters into a conversation with good faith. A mentor of sorts warned me, early on in my career, about the moments in ministry when it is clear that people are assuming the worst of each other and therefore not actually going to have a *conversation*; only exchange of accusations. Nicodemus is not guilty of contributing to that dynamic. He may come in the night but he is not dressed for battle.

The man is on a roll. He goes to Jesus, directly. He enters into a conversation with good faith. He acknowledges that God is at work in Jesus. Whatever reservations he may have about Jesus's approach to holiness of heart and life, he does not present himself as having a monopoly on truth.

Nicodemus does a number of things right.

His first misstep may be attempting to speak for others. Verse 2: "Rabbi, WE know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

[Those who study leadership and leadership teams for a living, call that "playing the senator" -- as in, perpetually showing up in the posture of having constituents to represent.]

His real gaffe, if we can call it that, involves an inability to grasp what Jesus thinks he ought to be able to grasp.

When Jesus asks, in verse 10, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? It's a hint that he, Jesus, does not see himself as saying something that is *all that mind-bending.

You must be born from above (v.7), he says.

Apparently, this isn't outside the bounds of the Hebrew Scriptures. And that's important

for us to recognize. Because if you get a bunch of church-folks together, and put the words “water” and “spirit” and “born from above” in front of them, someone is going to say that this is about... baptism.

Alright, well... *We could* make it about baptism. So long as we’re upfront about what we’re doing: reading something into the conversation that would not have been there when the conversation was actually had.

This is Berry Kercheville, of Woodland Hills Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee:

Jesus gave us a clue to what he expected of Nicodemus when he said, “Are you a teacher of the Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Jesus’ rebuke should change our perspective. Jesus did not tell Nicodemus something new; he told him what he should have *already known*. As a teacher of the Law, Nicodemus should have understood what it meant to be born of water and the Spirit... Whatever born of water and the Spirit meant it must have been explained in the Old Testament for Jesus to expect Nicodemus to understand it.

In other words, baptism as we know it came later. This notion of rebirth, surfacing here in John’s gospel, is rooted in the Book of Ezekiel.¹

But back to the man himself, he does a number of things right before he hits a wall. I think it is the nature of that wall, that you and I are asked to explore, this morning.

Jesus says: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus says *to him*: “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

Jesus more or less repeats himself: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit... you must be born from above.”

And Nicodemus bows up with a variation on a question he has already asked: “How can these things be?”

With that, he’s gone. He recedes into the night.

That Nicodemus, we say.

¹ Ezekiel 36:25-27: I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

The trouble with him was that he was a Pharisee, or less than a true believer, or you know, he just did not get it... The trouble Nicodemus was that he was Nicodemus.

I am reminded of the moment when Lucy confronts Charlie Brown.

"Discouraged again, eh, Charlie Brown?" [This is Lucy.]

"You know what your whole trouble is? The whole trouble with you is that you're you!"

Charlie, true to form, asks, "Well, what in the world can I do about *that*?"

Says Lucy: "...I merely point out the trouble."

Whereas Lucy enjoys her role -- she's content to name the problems, especially if she can phrase it in such a way that it's personal and absolute -- *You're the problem. You fix you* -- the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus occupies a different space.

Nicodemus is more than a man who does not get it and Jesus is more than the reproachfulness that we may hear in his words as conveyed to us by John.

Rather (and unlike Lucy) he's inviting Nicodemus to experience something new -- within himself -- and in relationship with others.

That may well be the wall.

There is a podcast called Sermon Brainwave. It's put out by Luther Seminary.² [Listening to it is like listening to four preachers figure out what they are going to preach on Sunday.] This week, one of the contributors shared how he was hearing one part of our text -- the part where Nicodemus asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

It sounded to him like someone grappling with why in the world they would want newness of life when the life that they were living was the fruit of their labors?

² A podcast is a digital audio file made available on the Internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device, typically available as a series, new installments of which can be received by subscribers automatically.

Why would you hope for newness, having already reached maturity? Having gotten settled or established? In Nicodemus's culture, age is associated with wisdom! Age positions you to enjoy a number of things!

It may be regarded differently in our time and place. **Still, I think we can relate to hitting the wall, the wall that is: *Do we need to even talk about rebirth?***

Or do we just need a few things (and maybe a few people) to be fixed?

A Nicodemus-like Christian (or the Nicodemus-like Christian *in me*) is willing to support Jesus. The distinct possibility that God is doing something through him does not offend.

Nicodemus-like churches are willing to talk about newness; as long as it is the kind of newness that promises to let us get to that newness without much of an impact on our ability to operate in our comfort zone.

A Nicodemus faith and a Nicodemus organization struggles to take Jesus up on his offer.

Now, as then, the offer stands. *Not because we have done a number of things right, but because God is God, and it is God's nature to invite us again and again, no matter how many times we fail to RSVP or recede into the night.

The invitation is this: *Let God work in and through your life.*³ *Let the faith that you have become more.*

And the grace? It is in Jesus's voice -- when he says to Nicodemus, to you and to me:

Follow me. Follow me to the cross and beyond. Into a newness of life where there is full participation in what God is doing right now, in and for the world that -- make no mistake -- God will save.

³ *Feasting on the Word*, K. Lewis and D. Kapp.