

“Born Again”

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

It’s impossible for me to know why you came to church today. Some of you are here simply because it’s Sunday and that’s when you go to church. Some of you are here this morning because you have a job to do or a commitment to keep. And some of you are here because your parents pried you out of bed and threatened you with punishment. All valid reasons. But some of you are here today because you are desperate. You are here because you’ve experienced something that has turned your life upside down and left you with all kinds of questions, and today, you are here seeking answers from Jesus.

In today’s reading from John, we are introduced to a man named Nicodemus who also came to seek answers from Jesus. John is the only Gospel writer to mention Nicodemus and, in the first verse of our reading, we learn important background information about this character. First, John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The term Pharisee literally means “the separate ones” and this group of Jewish scholars took great pride in being different from the rest of the population. They were highly educated in Scripture and they were very concerned with morality; in fact, they believed that the coming of the Messiah was directly tied to strict observance of the Old Testament Law of Moses. In other words, they believed that their very salvation depended on obedience.

But Nicodemus wasn’t just any Pharisee. John also tells us that Nicodemus was, “a ruler of the Jews” which meant he was a member of the ruling council known as “The Sanhedrin.” This was a select group of 70 highly educated and well-respected Jewish men who were revered as leaders of the people. Led by the Chief Priest, the men who served on the Sanhedrin were legal experts who oversaw the religious and civil welfare of Israel. To put simply, Nicodemus was big deal, and a *visit* from Nicodemus was an even bigger deal, and yet John doesn’t tell us why he came to see Jesus. From the text, we simply don’t know the reason for his visit. But we do know that he came at night, and we know that he came alone, and whether he had been directed by the Sanhedrin or had simply acted on his own, Nicodemus had gone to great lengths to keep his visit a secret. He came to Jesus under the cover of darkness looking for answers to his questions about God, and in respectful language Nicodemus began the discussion: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” But before he could offer his follow-up question Jesus jumped in, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

This abrupt interruption from Jesus caught Nicodemus off guard. He had acknowledged that Jesus was a rabbi from God and he must have come to Jesus looking for something, and yet, before he is able to even get to his question out, one sentence from Jesus has completely changed the conversation: “...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” In good Pharisee fashion, Nicodemus seized on Jesus’ words and naturally turned them into some kind of prescription for self-improvement, and yet his human logic failed him. So, searching for clarification about what he was now supposed to do, Nicodemus said to Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Nicodemus was looking for a simple tip from Jesus; an insight for living; something he could do to get closer to the perfection that God’s Law demanded, but Jesus was talking about impossible things. Nicodemus had come to Jesus looking for answers to his questions about what *he* must do for God, and now, here was Jesus talking about the things *God* does: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind

blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:5-7). And to this description of a Spirit-driven new life, “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’”

You see, Jesus didn’t speak about what Nicodemus could or should do. Jesus talked about what God would do completely outside of any effort Nicodemus could add, and to Nicodemus this made no sense! Nicodemus couldn’t believe it! And the truth is that, on our own, neither can we. William Willimon comments on this autonomous spirituality when he writes:

One of the most important pieces of American literature is not the Constitution but rather Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*... (because it is) one of the first self-improvement handbooks. “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” In fact...many of us (have a) deep faith that we can improve ourselves. By going to bed early and rising early, we can improve our wisdom and our wealth. And yet, in this Sunday’s Gospel, Nicodemus asks Jesus, “How?” and Jesus responds with two of the most passive, uncontrollable events: *birth and wind*. Can it be that our relationship with God is not based upon our will power but rather comes as a gift, as grace, as something that God gives rather than what we achieve?

You see the story of Nicodemus matters to us because – in this Pharisee – we see ourselves. We want to know what we need to do. We want to know how we can make things better. We want to know some hack that can help us to get ourselves back on track...and to this self-reliant and lethal illusion, God says, “No! There is nothing you can do.” In fact, Jesus says it this way, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

The truth is we must die to ourselves. We must die to our sin. Our attempts at self-improvement and our desire to go it alone must be put to death, and that is exactly what Paul tells us our baptism is all about. He writes in Romans 6, “that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death (and) buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4).

Listen again to Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” My friends, in the waters of your baptism your sinful nature was drowned; it was put to death...and in that moment a new birth occurred and this pattern of death and rebirth happens each time you lay down your sin and rely on the One who has taken it away. Luther wrote that “the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die...and that a new man should daily emerge and rise to before God in righteousness.” And each and every time we confess our sin to God and turn our eyes and hearts to the Son of Man, we have life.

Nicodemus matters to us because he heard the promise of God when Jesus said, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.” From all we know in the Bible, this is the only encounter Nicodemus ever had with Jesus and yet in this brief meeting at midnight, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was spoken to Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus seeking a prescription and instead, he received a promise. And, so have we!

My friends, today as we come to Jesus seeking answers, He greets us with the same words of promise He spoke to Nicodemus. It is a promise of life, and today, it is spoken directly to you, and in this saving and forgiving word, you are born again: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Go with the peace of the promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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