

NICODEMUS

John 3:1-15

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday in Lent, March 5, 2023, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

John 3:1-15

3Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.’

³Jesus answered him,

‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’

⁴Nicodemus 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?’

⁵Jesus answered,

‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” ⁸The 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.’

⁹Nicodemus said to him,

‘How can these things be?’

¹⁰Jesus answered him,

‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For the next three sermons this Lent, I want to focus on three different characters (or sets of characters) from the Gospel of John to see how they encountered Jesus. By watching them, I hope we can learn something new about him, but more importantly, I hope we can see something of *our own experience in their experience*, and learn from that. Today we will look at Nicodemus; next, the Samaritan Woman; and then on the 19th, the parents of the man born blind.

Let us pray: Lord, may the stories and characters from scripture we read be as close and real as the events in our life and our world, both small and large, beautiful and threatening. May their closeness and reality give us eyes to see what is upon us as much as possible through your eyes, and to hear your voice in the midst of all we experience. In the name of Christ. Amen.

So we start with Nicodemus, one of the first people to encounter Jesus in the Gospel of John.

- Nicodemus is a member of the Jewish Council. As such, he is part of the tradition into which Jesus was born but a tradition in which division soon occurs over Jesus and out of which opposition develops to him.
- In addition to being influential, Nicodemus is likely a person of wealth. We will see that in a later scene, when he joins Joseph of Arimathea in removing the body of Christ from the cross and ensuring it receives an honorable burial, to which he brings lavish amounts of myrrh and aloë.
- At the time we meet Nicodemus, in Chapter 3 of John's Gospel, Nicodemus has at least *heard* – if not *witnessed* with his own eyes – some of the *teaching* Jesus has brought and the two *signs* he has enacted so far: turning a shortage of ordinary water at a wedding into a lavish portion of wine – something the wealthy might appreciate – and soon thereafter driving money changers out of the Temple who were profiting from the offerings of Passover pilgrims – an action the poor might appreciate since they were disproportionately affected by such profiteering.

With these two contrasting events fresh in his mind – a *lavish wedding* and a *driving of moneychangers* from the Temple – Nicodemus is *moved to seek Jesus out*. He wants to *learn*, to *clarify*, to *understand*, to *figure out* who Jesus is and what he, Nicodemus, believes about Jesus. But given his public position as a member of the Council, he is likely to be noticed in daylight hours, so he comes to Jesus “by night.” “By night.”

II.

The seventeenth century Welsh poet Henry Vaughan was a lesser-known contemporary of John Donne and George Herbert, but he was equally drawn to dense verse about matters of faith and spirit. Prompted by the character of Nicodemus, Vaughan wrote a poem entitled “The Night.” Listen to a few of its verses:

*Through that pure virgin shrine,
That sacred veil drawn o'er Thy glorious noon,
That men might look and live, as glowworms shine,
And face the moon,
Wise Nicodemus saw such light
As made him know his God by night.*

...

*God's silent, searching flight;
When my Lord's head is filled with dew, and all
His locks are wet with the clear drops of night;
His still, soft call;
His knocking time; the soul's [silent]¹ watch,
When spirits their fair kindred catch.²*

¹ Vaughan has “dumb.” I have changed for the benefit of listeners.

² Henry Vaughan, “The Night,” Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50441/the-night-56d22d9009233>.

III.

“God’s silent, searching flight” indeed catches Nicodemus. He becomes the Spirit’s “fair kindred catch.”

In his nighttime encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus speaks first:

‘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.’

Jesus answers:

‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’

Now let’s pause for a minute: We may know this verse by its more common translation: “*No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again*”; or even its common usage: “*You must be born again*.” The reason it is sometimes translated *born from above* and sometimes *born again* is that the Greek word is the same for each translation: “*Anothen*.” “From above”? Or “again”?

The way Nicodemus initially hears *anohen* is “again,” for he says to Jesus:

How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?

But Jesus does not answer that *literal* and *earthly-level* question. Rather, Jesus says:

Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised³ that I said to you, “You must be born⁴ from above.”

Jesus has taken a *physiological* translation that is also about *time* – “*born again*” – and answered it with a *cosmological* translation about *origins* – “*born from above*.”

With his focus on the *origin* of faith, Jesus then says:

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.

With this verse, Jesus is drawing from the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, which reads:

Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.⁵

Yet Nicodemus is still compelled to ask the *how* question:

‘How can these things be?’ [he asks].

³ This is the translation used by Raymond E. Brown, which I believe captures a bit more of the intensity of the conversation. Raymond E. Brown, S.S. *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1966), 131.

⁴ Brown translates this word as “begotten,” emphasizes the origins of the gift with God better than “born.”

⁵ Ecclesiastes 11:5.

Jesus answers in a lengthy discourse. I want to point to the elements of his answer that speak to being *born from above*, which as best I can tell the predominant and overall focus of his answer. Listen to the *spatial* – as opposed to *temporal* – imagery Jesus uses:

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

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

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

These are all *spatial* images – *born from above*.

- The next time we see Nicodemus, a few chapters later, the Council of which he is a member is moving to arrest Jesus, and Nicodemus speaks up not in direct defense of Jesus's actions or identity, but of Jesus' *right to a hearing* before the officials decide to prosecute him.⁶
- The third and final time we see Nicodemus, he is accompanying Joseph of Arimathea in removing the body of Christ from the cross and preparing the body for burial. To this preparation, Nicodemus brings over 75 pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes, an extravagant amount of spices, as lavish as the wine Jesus provided at the Wedding at Cana.

Once Nicodemus and Joseph of Aramathea provide an honorable burial for Jesus, they step aside and are heard from no more. Both exit the stage of scripture. The Bible does not narrate where or how Nicodemus fits into this movement after the resurrection, after Jesus' appearances, after the gift of the spirit to the disciples, after his ascension. Nicodemus answered the "still, soft call," played his role in the ministry of Jesus, and went on into a history to which we do not have Biblical access.

IV.

There are several things we can deduce about *faith* from Nicodemus. I trust that some may speak to our own faith formation. Let me close by sharing a few.

- *First*, Nicodemus is *privileged* and *powerful*. He has an important seat on the religious council and can afford to lavish an enormous amount of spices for the body of Jesus at its burial. *Unblinded* by his privilege and power, Nicodemus maintains an ear that is open to what he is *hearing* about Jesus and an eye that is *observant* of the earthly actions early in Jesus' ministry. Nicodemus does not allow his social standing, vocation, or role in the community to stand in the way of exploring the deeper things of life through exploring the teachings and signs of Jesus, even if that exploration must begin *at night*. No matter how much power and privilege Nicodemus has, he pays attention to what he *sees* and *hears* from Jesus. It impacts him.
- Second, Nicodemus has a keen sense of *celebration* and a keen eye for *corruption*.
 - Nicodemus is initially drawn to Jesus at the beginning of his ministry when he *lavishes* wine at the Wedding Feast at Cana. In turn, Nicodemus himself will provide lavish spices for Christ's burial at the end of his life and ministry.

⁶ John 7:45-52.

- Nicodemus is *equally* drawn to the *prophetic anger* Jesus expresses against religious officials who corrupt the Temple as a place of prayer and who profit from taking advantage of the offerings of nearly 100,000 pilgrims, many of them poor.

Nicodemus seems to know that faith consists of *celebration* and *justice*, of lavish honoring of that which is *beautiful* in human life and intense opposition to that which is *corrupt* and *exploitative*. Just as the gospel writer Luke presents a heightened sense of music and poetry around Jesus while also depicting him as focused on the least, the last, and the lost, so also with Nicodemus we find one who responds to Jesus out of a sense of both celebration and justice.

- Third, Nicodemus appears to be one who is born into faith through the *action of God*, one who is born “*from above*.” Even though Nicodemus’ story contains the verse that is most associated – at least in this country – with how one is often expected to become a Christian – “*You must be born again*” – Nicodemus himself is prompted by the Spirit of God *from above*.

As a person who grew up in a culture in which being *born again* was the model of becoming Christian, but who himself never sought nor had such an experience, I have observed over the years the *value*, the *authenticity*, and indeed in many cases the *necessity* of such re-birth for many. But based on this story and others in the Bible in which Jesus encounters *individuals*, I do not believe that *being born again* is the *only* or *universal* way of coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Despite hearing the words *born again*, Nicodemus I believe becomes a faithful follower of Jesus Christ through God’s action on him and toward him *from above*.

- And fourth, Nicodemus is one who, as the poet says, “[comes] to know his God *at night*.” In a part of the poem I did not read, the poet describes the night:

*Dear night! this world’s defeat;
The stop to busy fools; care’s check and curb;
The day of spirits; my soul’s calm retreat
Which none disturb!*

It is in the night that Nicodemus answers Christ’s “still, soft call. If need be for you, I hope you, like Nicodemus, will answer that call as well and “[come] to know [our] God *at night*.”

Whether faith comes to us *from above* or through a dramatic experience of *rebirth*, it is *the* most precious gift we will ever receive. My prayer is that we will be led to

face the moon...and see such light
As [makes us] know our God – [even] by night.

Amen.