

## **Born From Above**

*A sermon given by the Reverend Casey FitzGerald on February 17, 2008, the second Sunday in Lent, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

### **Focus Text: John 3:1-17**

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?” Jesus answered, “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 astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “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. 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, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “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. “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.”*

“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.” It is easy to move quickly through verses 1-15, straight to perhaps the most famous versus in the Bible, and assume that we know what it is that Nicodemus hasn’t understood. The popular verse from John can be found on everything from coasters and bookends (as I discovered in Barnes and Noble earlier this week) to posters at NFL games. Such uses of the text seem to proclaim, “Here is the answer, in these simple verses. If you could see what we see...you’d understand and know Jesus and God as well as we do and be saved.” Many of us have turned these challenging verses into un-dynamic judgments on everyone else, rather than seeing them as points of contact with God as revealed in Jesus Christ, practicing what some refer to as “bumper sticker theology”—when you take one verse out of its context and base your belief system around it. Rather than hearing and living with the tension of love and judgment, quick efforts have been made to lay claim on the truth about God, about ourselves and about all those “other people.” We mistake an invitation to a relationship with God for the coming down of a new Law-by which we Christians, who know “the truth,” and God’s purpose—may judge others and glorify ourselves. I am afraid that in these assumptions we put ourselves squarely in the place of Nicodemus—assuming that we hold all the information and know just how it’s meant to be processed. In doing so, we leave little room for the living God.

Nicodemus has all the supposed needed knowledge/facts before him—he even goes so far as to include Jesus’ role as conveyor of God’s word among the facts—after all, he has seen the signs from God in Jesus Christ. He approaches Jesus at night, and begins his conversation by noting that Jesus’ power is from God. Jesus responds, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (Some translate this as “born again,” others as “born anew.”) Like a child, Nicodemus takes what Jesus says to him literally, missing the depth of Jesus’ statement. Nicodemus has the tools, he has done his research, he “knows” who Jesus is—why would he be so very befuddled at Jesus’ response to him? This is Nicodemus’ folly—and perhaps our folly, too. We want so badly for the Bible to instruct us as to what to do, it is easy to miss the meaning of the revealed Christ. In my readings for this sermon, I came across a retelling of John 3 entitled, “Nicodemus misses his chance at true faith.” I was astonished by this title—not because I deny Nicodemus’ inability to understand Jesus—but because of the decisiveness and permanence with which this interpreter excluded Nicodemus from the faithful.

A relative of mine, a high school student who as of late has taken a keen interest in the Bible recently emailed me (I have the dubious honor of being the family “expert” on all things Christian). Though he has not grown up going to church, he has been wondering about God. He has read Scripture with great diligence and care—hanging on every word as if his life depended on them. A few months ago, I was surprised to read the following email:

*Dear Casey,*

*I just have one quick question, if right now I feel like I can't believe in God, does that mean that I can never be saved again? Because I have been getting by my worries by telling myself that if God is there, he does love me. I don't know if this is the right thing to do but it seems to be helping.*

*Thanks, Thomas*

We have had many conversations concerning his “quick question.” Thomas approaches his faith (or self-declared lack thereof) quite seriously. Like Nicodemus, Thomas has the tools before him, has studied Scripture with great zeal and has a real desire to believe in God—but can’t seem to make that final, revelatory connection with God. If I interpreted Thomas’ struggle like the commentator on the Nicodemus passage, my reply might have been the following:

*Dear Thomas,*

*It is unfortunate to hear that though you have been presented with the greatest gift of all—that of the knowledge of Jesus Christ—you are unable to receive said gift. As the third chapter of John points out, you would do well to worry about your salvation—after all, how many chances does one person get? I am sorry for what pain this knowledge might cause you.*

*You will be in my prayers.*

*Casey*

“Nicodemus misses his chance at true faith.” If this interpretation is true, how many of us have also missed our “chance”? Certainly we can count my relative among those who’ve missed their chance—I would venture I might also be included among the lost. The prospect is frightening. I have had plenty of Sundays in my lifetime, and I’m sure there are more to come, when I go through the motions—when I bring all the right tools, all the appropriate knowledge to worship and leave no room for God to enter in. I hope and pray that on these Sundays I have not missed my “chance.” My study of Scripture leads me to believe that this is not the case.

All this is to say that what is revealed in this third chapter of John cannot be summed up in one line—no matter how deep and powerful that line may be—not without hearing and relating to the struggle of Nicodemus. What we are speaking of here is *revelation*—and revelation is not normally a stagnant once-and-for-all experience. A flat reading of our text does not encompass a true revelatory experience. As theologian H. Richard Niebuhr writes, “When we speak of revelation we mean that something has happened to us in our history which conditions all our thinking and that through this happening we are enabled to apprehend what we are, what we are suffering and doing and what our potentialities are.”<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr’s view of revelation is that it is a total embodiment of what has been discovered...that life cannot be the same once the revelation has been experienced.

For us as Christians, we proclaim Jesus as God’s revelation to us. Our being “born anew” or “born from above” is first the revelatory act of God, it is the movement of the Spirit, and *then* it is our response to that revelation. This sort of revelation which Niebuhr describes can be likened to that which Jesus describes as being “born from above.” But I have come to believe that such a revelation seldom takes place in an instant, more often taking a lifetime, and even more often such a revelation affects us differently at different points in our lives.

We may discern from the text that this embodied experience of revelation, comes only with knowledge that what we know of God comes not from fastidious research or diligent piety, but from God’s initiating a

---

<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 138.

relationship with us. This is just what Jesus does with Nicodemus. Nicodemus may have been blinded by his own learnedness, but I cannot believe that this one encounter with Jesus has excluded him from the grace revealed in Jesus Christ. If all of us had a one-time-only shot at receiving Christ's revelation and being saved—how many of us would miss our chance? And I think we would do well to remember that this is not the end of Nicodemus' story.

Our final snapshot of the misguided Pharisee is not one of lofty dialogue, but of pain and sorrow and loss—of Nicodemus taking Jesus down from the cross and burying him. In our own way, we take this journey toward the crucifixion (and resurrection) with Nicodemus. Most of us have journeyed through Lent before, but perhaps in these days some of us will experience moments of revelation when we move from carrying the weight of all our presuppositions and learning to carrying the weight of the cross—of the crucified Christ—alongside our brother Nicodemus...of finally or at least momentarily opening ourselves to the mystery of God's revelation in Jesus Christ...that God so loved the world he gave us his Son—that despite our thick-headedness we might be born from above and given new life...that even in our darkest seasons we might experience the light that comes from God alone. And so I reply:

*Dear Thomas,*

*There once was a man named Nicodemus. He was a well-educated man—one of the Pharisees. He had seen a lot of Jesus' miracles, and believed that Jesus had been sent by God because of all that he had seen. But he couldn't seem to wrap his head around Jesus' divinity, or what God had planned for the world through Jesus Christ. Nicodemus was confused. He had read the scriptures, seen Jesus' amazing signs, and approached Jesus with all the respect he deserved as a great teacher sent by God. Nick admired this teacher Jesus, and one night Nick came to him, praising Jesus for all that he did in God's name. But Jesus' response was somewhat funny. Nick would've settled for a thank you—it was a beautiful night and though he was sincere in his compliments, he was really just making small talk. Much to Nick's surprise, Jesus said, "you have to be born from above." Nick was confused...here he was, just trying to pay the guy a compliment and instead he gets into a conversation he doesn't understand. He'd never heard such an expression. He wondered aloud, even though it feels silly, how he might be born a second time...and how his mother would take it. "No, no," said Jesus. "You're not getting my meaning. You're thinking of the kind of birth your mother gave you—I'm talking about something different entirely. Born of water and Spirit. I'm talking about being born from ABOVE."*

*"Oh," muttered Nick, but despite his efforts, he still didn't understand. Jesus had a funny way of making himself "clear."*

*"I've tried to tell you a few different ways, Nick, but you're not really getting it," continued Jesus. "You think you've got it all figured out—all I'm asking is that you be open to me. Be open to me, and I'll keep trying like I have been from the start. After all, I knew you even before you were born the first time!" Nick looked even more perplexed. "Look Nick, it's as simple as this: God loves you so much that he sent me here. It's got a lot more to do with me and God than it has to do with you. It's plain enough to see, you don't need to be a rocket-scientist to figure it out." Jesus really wanted Nick to understand—it was lonely being misunderstood, and he did love Nick after all. He continued, "For God so loved the world that he gave me, so that everyone who believes in me may have eternal life."*

*Nicodemus quickly responded, "So what you're saying is if I'm having a hard time understanding you or believing in you, I will NOT have eternal life. I think I've heard this somewhere—something about me being left behind, or unsaved or something."*

*Jesus looked frustrated. "Would you stop interrupting me please? Once again you're missing the point. Let me finish. God did not send me into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through me." For all his efforts, Nick continued to stare blankly at Jesus—wondering if Jesus had really kept up with his Scripture studies all these years or gone to temple enough.*

*It was an awkward conversation which left them both a little confounded and unsatisfied. Nick went back to his work as a Pharisee, still diligent in his Biblical studies and practices, and still confused about what Jesus had meant. Just a few years later, Nicodemus would encounter Jesus again...at the*

*foot of the cross. Taking great care, Nicodemus removed Jesus from the cross, carried him to his tomb, and laid him to rest. We don't know what was in his heart on that fateful day, but I suspect it might have been at least the size of a mustard seed.*

*Thomas, there are always times we will feel that despite all of our hard work and study, despite all of our good deeds and efforts, we have doubts—that belief is beyond us. Perhaps we will even fear exclusion from God's kingdom. But as Martin Luther proclaimed, "Who will despair if God so loves the world?"<sup>2</sup> As we move toward the cross this Lent, may we be open to God's Spirit, who is waiting to give us all new life in Jesus Christ.*

*Your companion on the journey,  
Casey*

---

<sup>2</sup> Luther, Martin, *Martin Luther's Easter Book*, Ed. By Roland H. Bainton, 29.