

2nd Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2020

Rev. Jacob Snowden

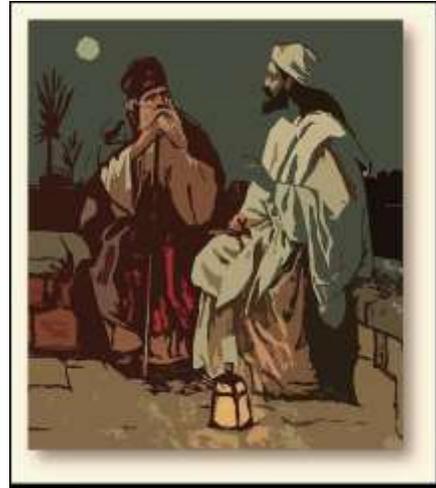
Genesis 12:1-4

Psalm 121

Romans 4: 1, 13-17

John 3:1-17

**A Lenten Encounter with Jesus:
Nicodemus Comes at Night**



Providence Lithograph Co. 1904

Reading from John, chapter 3, verses 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.”

The Word of the Lord.

Let us pray:

God, may the light of your love brighten our night that we may see what it means for us to be born anew in grace and compassion. Amen.

This is the second week of Lent and the second week in Woods's Lenten Series: Encounters with Jesus. This week we are encountering Nicodemus, in the hope that understanding Nicodemus might shine new light on God's love for us in Christ.

This is neither Nicodemus nor Jesus. This is Tim Tebow with John 3:16 on his eye black. There is no more prominent, prevalent, or public pronouncement of the gospel than John 3:16. The reference, if not the verse itself, shows up at rallies, sporting events, tattoos, and even the bottom of an In and Out Burger cup.



If you leave church today knowing nothing other than God loves you, then this will be a good Sunday. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.* This simple point--that God loves you and all the world is Jesus' good news. God is not in the condemning business but the salvation business we read in verse seventeen.

I have wondered if the best sermon this week (or any week, really) is simply to say God loves and cares for you. Amen. Sara reminded me that the conclusion to my very first sermon, when I was 16, ended this way, "God loves you. Don't sin, and I'm done." Part of me thinks that isn't so bad.

However, I'm not quite done today. Hopefully that's not a serious disappointment to you. This week I have thought about how people encounter signs of God's love. Perhaps you've encountered a literal sign when watching a baseball game.



Yet Nicodemus encountered Jesus very differently. He didn't happen upon Jesus by channel surfing and he wasn't standing in a stadium. Instead, Nicodemus encountered this gospel message preferring privacy to publicity. Disguised by darkness, Nicodemus encountered Jesus. This is the second thing we learn about Nicodemus in John's gospel.

The first thing we learn as we encounter Nicodemus is that he is a prominent Pharisee. And the stereotype of Pharisees is something like this: they have never met a rule book they did not like. They are studious and thoughtful because policy and procedure keep things, as Presbyterians might say, decent and in order (although perhaps the stereotype suggests they lean toward order more than decency). Nicodemus is a leader on the council of elders--Raymond Brown considers

this to be the Jerusalem Sanhedrin--Israel's Religious Supreme Court. There could be no greater honor for a Pharisee than to be a respected elder in Jerusalem.

Beyond being two strange "P" words, I think the stereotype of Presbyterians is pretty close to the stereotype of Pharisees.

Jesus had been in Jerusalem "doing signs" according to John 2. And Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to say, "We know you're a gifted teacher who has come from God because of the signs you have done." Whether Nicodemus expected healing or a magic trick, who could say? In any case, Jesus responded to him by saying, "No one can see without *gennethe anothen*," a tricky Greek phrase meaning something between being born from above, again, from the beginning, the top.

Nicodemus responds,

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

When Jesus says one must be born again to enter the Kingdom of God, perhaps Nicodemus went into a literalist mode. We could read that he responded with his best left-brain, legal scholar, word parsing mode. He simply stated what we all know--this sounds impossible and nutty. Who has time for this...certainly not the honorable Justice Nicodemus. Yet what is worth a second look is not about the biology of the impossible. That might have more to do with our literalism than Nicodemus'. What sort of longing pause might have lingered before he quipped, "I mean would you like to talk to my mother about this born again stuff!?"

Being old is not about age alone. As Presbyterians our name literally marks us as a church of elders. Talking about a new birth should cause us some discomfort. A new birth, a second birth, calls into question the life Nicodemus had carefully cultivated on his way to being a prim and proper Presbyterian. I mean Pharisee--Freudian slip. How many long nights like this one had Nicodemus sacrificed making the right connections, refining his resume to find himself a faithful and proper leader among the Jews? Why does Nicodemus come at night if not to avoid risking his theological reputation and posterity in the community. Surely he worked hard for all the right credentials, knowing all the rules, navigating all the boundaries and limits.

Whether you call that Presbyterian or Pharisaical, I know I have met some people who are always on guard for their reputations.

How many times might Nicodemus have done steeple work instead of people work and known it, felt it, and even lamented it? Can we admit to times in our own lives where trying to do things decently and in order, we are forced to choose one for another? Are there times you've seen what is orderly is indecent, or what would be decent isn't strictly by the book?

Against the backdrop of institutional loyalty and pedigree, Jesus had asked Nicodemus to be born again--to start anew, just like he asked Peter and Andrew to put their nets aside and take up as fishers of men. Can Nicodemus embrace a new kind of identity, a new family, a new community by being born anew? And turning on a life he must have worked hard for? After

reaching the pinnacle of posterity, could he start again as a novice? Unless he does, Jesus says, he won't see the new things that God is doing.

No one enters the Kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit. What is flesh is flesh and what is Spirit is Spirit, Jesus said to a now nervous Nicodemus.

If Nicodemus was unclear about what Jesus was saying before, this cryptic corollary probably doesn't help. Perhaps a birth by water is a reference to a literal, physical birth. After all, the first sign of a birth is the breaking of the water. If so, the birth by spirit is Jesus' focus. However, I am unconvinced that Jesus meant a first, literal birth.

Nicodemus isn't conflicted by a spirit of curiosity. As I read it, he sincerely sought to know Jesus. Patricia Farris, a pastor of First United Methodist of Santa Monica, CA, calls Nicodemus the Patron Saint of Seekers. She suggests that his reason for coming to Jesus at night has nothing to do with secrecy, but because rabbis had taught that the Torah was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day had all died away. By this reading, Nicodemus used his precious study time to encounter God beyond the standard scriptures. While I disagree with Rev. Farris about why Nicodemus wants a discussion in the dark, I concede that he had a sincere seeker spirit.

What then might a birth by water and spirit mean? Why does Jesus double down on his impossible metaphor? As I read it, with a touch of grace, I consider Jesus affirming Nicodemus' spirit. His desire to encounter Jesus--the wind that blew him toward Jesus--was just right. Yet a birth by water means a baptism. A tangible, public sign of faith must accompany the intangible, inner workings of the Spirit.

Let me say this another way: Jesus asked that Nicodemus's thoughts be aligned with his actions. What good are religious ruminations if they are buried beneath the burden of a bureaucracy? That's steeple work, not people work. Steeples, like the Sabbath, are made to serve people, not the other way around.

If the Spirit is nimble and unpredictable, yet folks like Nicodemus are tethered to the intransigence of an institution, how then can they seek to follow the gentle nudge of the Spirit?

Nick at Night knew what he was risking by coming to Jesus. He tried to hold his two worlds together by coming with the discretion of darkness. He had to encounter Jesus, so he brought his curiosity but unfortunately not his pedigree or posterity. He sought to straddle the old and the new, and for this perhaps we can give him partial credit.

I love a new word I read for the first time this week: Nicodemite. I think an interesting definition of a Nicodemite comes from Gail Godwin's novel, [The Finishing School](#):

“There are two kinds of people: one kind you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very nice self but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas the other kind keeps moving, changing. With these people, you can never say “X stops here” or “Now I know all there is to know

about Y"...They are fluid. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard against congealing."

I'm unconvinced Nicodemus was congealed, or else why would he have come to Jesus? He came awfully close though. A Nicodemite straddles the fence--is a little rigid in the joints. So Jesus says with grace, not with condemnation--dip into the waters, let the spirit limber you up, and with hope let us go wherever God might lead us. Even for Nicodemites, Jesus came not to condemn but to save, to set us free and make us whole.

If we are limber, then God's Spirit still surprises like an ever-changing wind, bringing life and love and justice where despair and death have been. So may we see God's Spirit working as a gift from above. Blest, may we then be a blessing to this world that God so loves.