

Sermon
Westminster Presbyterian Church
2nd Sunday of Lent
March 8, 2020

Old Testament Lesson

Ecclesiastes 11:1-5

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

John 3:1-15 NRSV

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.

What Did You Say?

On a pleasant spring evening, you decide to get out of the house and **take a stroll** around the block. It’s been a really long day with people pulling at your sleeve, asking questions that do not have simple answers, and disputing your authority at your position. Whether you are, or have been, a school teacher, a hospital administrator, the owner of a small business, a clerk at a convenience store, or a stay-at-home parent, there is a **common experience** here for most of us. When we are trying to relax at the end of a long day, most people want to clear their minds and **avoid any interruption.**

But, a lot of this situation I just described could carry over to our **scripture lesson** today. **Jesus** seems to be going about his routine, possibly taking that evening stroll that I just mentioned. Suddenly, he encounters this person, Nicodemus, who is a Pharisee. Quickly, the scene is set for us. And, it is as **relevant** for you and me in this sanctuary today as it was for those gathered to hear this gospel story in a **house church** in Asia Minor nearly 2000 years ago. No matter our time or location, the gospel writer wants to bring you and me into the **life and mind of Jesus**. But, hold onto your hat: This is the *Gospel of John* and a different depiction of Jesus altogether.

In this Gospel, Jesus is hardly like you and me. In fact, Jesus seems almost **other-worldly**. This depiction of Jesus remains in stark contrast what we find about the Son of God in the *Gospel of Mark*. In **Mark** the actions of Jesus and his words are **simple and direct**. But, when we read about Jesus in the *Gospel of John*, we find that his statements are **more complicated**. A conversation with Jesus transforms into **theological discussion** and observation. When words such as **hunger** are mentioned, Jesus quickly elevates everything to another level. Listen to this about bread and eating, responding to someone in the crowd:

“Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

John 6:31-35 NRSV

As you can tell, Jesus has a different quality about him in *John*. After all, Jesus is **of God** and in many ways is very **like God**. In many areas of this Fourth Gospel, it is as if Jesus is already resurrected and in the glory of God’s **ruling power** with the **Holy Spirit**. None of this runs totally counter to the other three gospels, and yet it is a different presentation altogether.

With these comments in hand, let’s look further into our scripture lesson. As we read earlier, Jesus is confronted by a somewhat mysterious person, **Nicodemus**. He knows something about Jesus, but apparently he is not a follower. Indeed, Nicodemus is described as a **Pharisee**. This immediately puts us on edge, because the Pharisees oppose Jesus at nearly every turn in all four gospels. And yet, Nicodemus comes to Jesus asking questions and **seeking answers** which seem sincere, at least in the beginning. Despite these suspicions, Nicodemus remained engaged in talking with Jesus, as Jesus takes him into **deeper levels** of thought, using various common elements to illustrate his points. Obviously, the writer of *John* is a great **story teller**. And, the things that are brought out in the conversation with Nicodemus are things that you and I have probably thought about, as well.

Well, what is behind all of this? Was this arranged in advance, or was it spontaneous? Is it a chance encounter? Let’s take a look at what we know.

Since Nicodemus is a **Pharisee**, we need to explain what that entails. If we were putting on a church play for children, this is where the hissing and booing might start. Throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees oppose Jesus. But, we need to understand that in ancient Palestine, these are upstanding people, and they are very influential. The Pharisees are a **religious sect** within Judaism that went to great pains to avoid violating the hundreds of laws that had developed by this time. Remember that at the time of Jesus, **Palestine** is ruled by Rome, and the Pharisees are part of the scene. They are active in worship at the temple, and it appears that they had some **political influence**, as well.

In fact, if we put them into the 21st century, they would fit into the day-to-day activity of our fine town, because they might be mistaken for church-going **Presbyterians** or Episcopalians: law-abiding, upstanding citizens. When compared with **slaves and servants**, the Pharisees were relatively wealthy. For all appearances, they were trying hard to be the “good guys.” Today, the term Pharisee is negative because in the Gospels Jesus calls them out for being too good! All too often, they **disregard the poor**, the widows, and the orphans: They have become **uncharitable** and very **rigid**.

So, it seems that one, or some, of the Pharisees became very **curious** about Jesus. Regardless, Jesus knows something about Nicodemus. One view is that they are “sizing up” each other. Otherwise, it seems that they have not met before.

Well, the encounter goes on. Jesus listens to this Pharisee and uses **the words** from Nicodemus to lay out an increasingly complex and **insightful argument** that moves quickly into salvation, the **divinity of Jesus**, and the full scope of **his mission** in the world. Even though they are meeting **at night**, Jesus begins to shed **LIGHT** on the full scope and mission of **the church**.

Now, if these details have escaped you in the past, or if this is **totally new** scripture to you, welcome aboard. Lots of people take these verses in different directions and many of their conclusions are valid. In fact, in the past 30-40 years many sincere persons have used these words and applied them solely to **personal salvation**: Being born again. I ask you to free yourself from that limited view for the moment. While there is truth and value to **spiritual rebirth**, there is a lot more than that in these exchanges and discussion. Nicodemus is talking about a literal rebirth, but Jesus has something else in mind. Nicodemus wants to interview a rabbi. Instead, he stands before the **Son of God**, and he is either baiting Jesus, or he is totally **clueless**.

One day, a fellow walked into a doctor's office here in town and the receptionist asked him what he had. He looked at her and said, "I've got shingles." So, she took down his name and address, got his medical insurance number, and gave him the history form to fill out. As he is reaching for his reading glasses, the medical assistant calls him back into an examining room. Before the door closes, she asks him what he had, to which the man replied, "Well, I've got shingles." Very quickly and efficiently, she took his vital signs and recorded them, and told him to wait in the examining room. Ten minutes later a nurse came in and asked him what he had.

He said, "I've got shingles." So, she recorded his past illnesses: specifically, "Did he have chicken pox as a child?" And then, she told him to take off all his clothes and wait for the doctor.

Fifteen minutes later the doctor came in and asked him what he had. He said, "I've got shingles." The doctor said, "Where?" The man said, "Doc, they're outside in the truck and I'm waitin' on the roofers! Where do you want to me unload 'em?"

Unlike our story, there is no mistaking **the intent** of Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus opens up quickly:

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."

John 3:2 NRSV

Nicodemus addresses Jesus as, "Rabbi." That would be respectful, and perhaps it reflects a bit of **formality** between these two persons. The conversation has begun, but Jesus is not bowled over with the initial flattery.

Immediately, Jesus sets the tone, which is typical for this Gospel. We are not sure of the intent of Nicodemus, but he will soon learn that his questions will receive answers that are intended to **shift his focus** from Jesus to **salvation** and to **God's presence and might**. This is typical for Jesus in *John*: The topic at hand and the discussion go far **beyond the starting point**. Jesus moves the conversation from personal salvation to a much broader understanding of being "**born again**."

In this passage, **God is speaking** to us in a very **deep place**. Repeatedly, Jesus points out that our belief has to **move past** the immediate concerns of **origin, position, and culture**, because these are the very aspects of life and society that concern the Pharisees so greatly. If he is sincere, then it appears that Nicodemus is **new to the faith**. If we assume this, he probably is a lot like you and me: trying to make sense of it all as we **live out** our faith!

Perhaps, our filter is a bit different today. We concern ourselves with the way we might interact with the world as we push into this new reality of a life in Christ:

What will **my friends** say if they think I have become some "holy roller"?

Or, will people notice that **I pray** a blessing before my meal?

Am I in the "right" **prayer group** or Bible study?

Is this the church that will tell me what **I need to know** to be saved?

Rather than lay out specific answers, Jesus guides Nicodemus, and us, to **explore the full reality** of salvation and living a new life **in Christ**: one that arises from our faith in Christ and the **power of God**.

In this conversation, Jesus moves beyond **images of birth** by bringing in another meaning for this word in the original Greek: **starting over**. Jesus wants us to move to images of **water and rebirth**. Jesus spells it out, saying that we are **born in water and in God's Spirit**. And, this is where a **deeper meaning** should enter our thinking. Because, for us in the church the mention of water and Spirit should lead us to recall something about **our baptism**, one of our two sacraments in our **Reformed tradition**.

In our baptism, **God's Spirit comes** to us and **never leaves!** That is why we baptize only once. Our baptismal font remains in place **each Sunday** to remind us of this. And, we have been given the **Eucharist**, the Lord's supper, to remind us of that baptism, as well. The entire ritual of our liturgy is here each week to remind us of these **foundational aspects** of our belief. In our Reformed tradition, in being **Presbyterian**, we worship with **purpose and intent and sincerity**. And, so very much of it can be traced back to this scripture lesson and all that **we learn about Christ** in this season of **Lent**.

Now, we realize that while we can begin a discussion with our **personal salvation**, we **cannot stop** our discussion there. We are **baptized into the body of Christ**. The reality of this scripture lesson is that Jesus, Nicodemus, you, and I are talking about the **whole church** of Jesus Christ. And, that relates all of us to the **body and life** of Jesus Christ.

And, in **our life in Christ**, we have to take in our neighbor, who shares in **God's Creation** with us. We cannot live a life in Christ in isolation. In the *Gospel of John*, we may focus on **salvation**, but we do so in concert, and in cooperation, with **others**. Like a Pharisee seeking Jesus in the night, **we learn new things** about ourselves, our salvation, and our purpose of our own encounter with **the Living Christ**.

A Pharisee named **Nicodemus** came to Jesus in **the dark** and seemed to have a tough time understanding all that Jesus said. But, through their discussion, **new light** is shed on the requirements for **faith in God**, the resulting **changes** that occur in us from that belief, and the possibilities for **service** that will take place as **God works in each one of us**. In this scripture lesson, Nicodemus asks several questions, each time **failing to understand** the responses from Jesus.

Like you and me, Nicodemus was struggling as he **engaged with Jesus**. You and I are not so different from this inquiring Pharisee. The writer is putting us **into the story**. As Jesus is repeating himself, he creates a proof statement on **faith**. But, the hardest part is that each statement makes an ever-increasing **demand** on Nicodemus and on **each one of us**.

In *John*, we find that Jesus is concerned with us and about **our salvation**, but Jesus spells out **new aspects** of faith, increasing our **understanding** of God, **God's Spirit**, and **Christ** himself. Through these special words set in dialogue, you and I learn that we are to be **transformed**. In addition, **we are to be changed** in a very real way. We are a **new creation** in Christ, and that begins with **our faith**.

No matter where you and I are in our **spiritual journey**, through it all **God remains with us**. In the middle of the night, Jesus stood before Nicodemus as the presence of God. In the same way, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, **God is present** with us all the time, even when we, like Nicodemus, fail to recognize Christ in our lives or **God's Spirit** at work in us and in others.

Like Nicodemus we may never stop **asking questions**. Rest assured, God is prepared to answer them all. Are you and I ready for what **Jesus** has to say and for what **God has planned** for each one of us?