

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, UT  
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“Nicodemus”

Genesis 12:1-4, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed little Alex standing in the foyer of the church staring up at a large plaque. It was covered with names and small American flags mounted on either side of it. The six-year old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside the little boy, and said quietly, 'Good morning Alex.' Good morning Pastor, he replied, still focused on the plaque. Pastor, what is this? The pastor said, Well son, it's a memorial to all the young men and women who died in the service. Soberly, they just stood together, staring at the large plaque. Finally, little Alex's voice, barely audible and trembling with fear asked, "Which service...the 8:30 or the 11:00?"

Nicodemus is also somewhat stupefied! Nic comes to Jesus at night. He has a reputation to uphold as one of the Pharisees, the super religious lay leaders. Remember: Pharisees are good religious folks like us!

Why does Nic come to see Jesus? It could be that he is simply testing Jesus, like so many other Pharisees, scribes, lawyers, and Sadducees. But I like to believe that he really wants to know if this Jesus is for real.

That's a good place for us to start, as well. We ask ourselves, is this Jesus for real? Does he have anything to offer me? When we get to the point of asking the question, "Do I have anything to offer him," then we are getting someplace.

The conversation begins this way: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. No one can do the signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

It's not clear what signs Nicodemus has heard about. The only sign or miracle reported to this point in John's gospel is Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding in the town of Cana. Perhaps there were more that John did not report before this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus.

What does Jesus say when Nic acknowledges him to be from God? "Very truly I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." This entire conversation is filled with strange sayings by Jesus, but that's kind of how John's gospel is.

We are more familiar with the rendering of the Greek into the term "born again." We are all familiar with the term "born again Christians." The Greek word is *anōthen*, translated at other points in the Bible as "from above."

The distinction is largely academic. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born once again, and in fact that birth must be from above. It must be a new birth, a birth which comes from heaven.

What is that all about? Some believe that this new birth is something that must happen in an instant in time, and there is no doubt that some Christ-followers experience some kind of transformative, life-changing event. But I would question with vigor the statement that it must be that way for everyone. I believe the process of being born from above can take many years.

And at what point does that process turn into the process that we like to call *sanctification*? Sanctification is simply the process of growing in Christ, becoming more Christ-like, the process of growing from baby Christians into more and more mature Christians. It is process that takes a lifetime and is never complete. So how is the process of being born from above different from the process of sanctification? I'll let you wrestle with that one for awhile.

So here we go. Nicodemus is immediately confused. “What?” he says. “How can anyone be born again?” Nic’s problem is that he wants to take Jesus’ statement literally. He isn’t yet thinking on the same plane as Jesus. In fact, in this particular conversation, he never gets to that plane.

Jesus makes an effort to explain. “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and of Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Commentators aren’t in agreement about what Jesus means when he tells Nic that he must be born of water. Some think it means simply the water of physical human birth. Some think he refers to baptism. Some think that he is making a reference to water as the necessary substance for life, especially in the parched Judean landscape.

More clear, at least to us, is the statement that Nic must be born of the Spirit. The Spirit must have its way with him, and with us, if we are to see the kingdom of God. We know that, but we are experts at holding the Spirit at bay, or at least we try to.

Jesus continues his teaching with Nicodemus. “Don’t be amazed that I have told 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.” That’s how it is with those who are born of the Spirit.

We actually have some possibility of grasping what’s going on with this still very complex statement. To be guided by the Spirit is to be moved about by the wind. I like to think, rather than like a tumbleweed blowing across the desert, it is more like a leaf being moved by a gentle breeze. With that said, there is no doubt that sometimes people are propelled by the Spirit like a tumbleweed in a 50 mile an hour gale. But the image of a leaf in a more gentle breeze I think is more realistic for us most of the time.

You have probably heard before that both the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma* are alternately translated wind or spirit, depending on the context in which the word appears. When Jesus tells Nic that the wind blows where it will and that no one knows where it came from or where it is going, he is describing the working of the Holy

Spirit, the wind, in the lives of those who are born from above. We are no longer in control of our own destinies (as if that were truly possible anyway).

Nic’s problem is that he is steeped and mired in a particular way of doing religion. It’s a way of following rules and restrictions. Being careful to do certain things and avoiding the doing of other things. To be righteous is to follow a rule book.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, there is a better way. The rule book does not have to be discarded, but, he says to the befuddled Pharisee, allow the Holy Spirit to drive you, to lead you, to push you where you may not want to go. Let go, Jesus is saying.

Nic’s confusion continues. “How can these things be?” And that’s all that we hear from him in this conversation.

Jesus adopts an attitude of discipline at this point. “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? We speak about what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not believe our testimony. I have told you about earthly things, and you have not believed. How can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

It appears to me that Jesus HAS been speaking of heavenly things, but perhaps he simply means that he is using earthly analogies like birth and wind.

Then Jesus speaks of his own nature, as he often does in John’s gospel: “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 desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Jesus here refers to the passage in the book of Numbers, in which Moses makes a snake of bronze, fastens it to a pole and lifts it over the heads of the people. They were being afflicted by snakes that God had sent among them, because they were complaining during their forty year trek through the desert.

So the bronze snake was a means of salvation for the people. Jesus tells Nic that he, too must be lifted up. He doesn’t say it explicitly, but he refers to the cross, of course.

To drive the point home, we have the gospel in a sentence, John 3.16; “For God so loved the world that he have 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 that the world might be saved through him.”

Jesus here tells Nicodemus why he was sent. Jesus comes very close to calling himself the Son of Man, but not quite, at least in this passage. And he tells Nic that God has sent him so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal, abundant, overflowing, vibrant life. The Son of Man was not sent to condemn, but to save.

This conversation has gone a long way off from where Nicodemus expected it would go. He almost certainly came to Jesus with a list of questions. All he had a chance to say

was, “We know you are from God.” You can imagine his mouth open as he gets ready to speak his first question. Then the conversation goes the way Jesus wants it to go, and Nic is simply along for the ride.

His two questions actually turn out to be: (1) How can anyone be born again? And (2) How can these things be? You get the impression that Nicodemus is simply left in the dust, scratching his head and trying to make some kind of sense of what this Rabbi has said.

I want to flash forward in John’s gospel to two events that happen later. The first of those events is in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter. The chief priests and Pharisees, with Nicodemus present, are upset that the people are asking if Jesus might be the Messiah. They send the temple guards to arrest him, but the guards return amazed at the words they have heard him speak. The Pharisees claim that they alone have authority and ability to recognize the Messiah, not the common rabble.

Nicodemus is deeply concerned that his colleagues plan to do harm to Jesus, and asks them, “Does not our law give people a hearing to find out what they are doing, before judging them?”

The Pharisees turn on Nicodemus in rage, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? The scriptures tell us that no prophet is to come from Galilee.” So he is ridiculed and spurned by his colleagues.

The second event involving Nicodemus is after Jesus has been crucified and has died. In John chapter 19, Nicodemus and a man named Joseph come and take the body of Jesus, wrap it in cloth and spices, and place it in a tomb.

There’s something odd going on here. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, and has a very confusing conversation with him. Some time later he defends Jesus before his angry Pharisee brethren. And after Jesus’ death, he claims the body and buries it in the traditional Jewish fashion, with respect. Why? Why does Nic behave this way? Why doesn’t he just leave that nighttime conversation, confused, and decide that this Rabbi from Nazareth must be crazy, or really has nothing to say?

Here’s the question: What has happened to Nicodemus?

And here’s the answer: he has encountered the Son of God. Nicodemus has run flat into the Messiah, and he has been changed. He has been born again, born from above. And his life will never be the same again.

That’s what Jesus does, of course. We meet him, and our lives are never the same again. How do we meet him? We meet him in the scriptures, and most especially in the gospels. And we meet him in prayer.

The problem with encountering Jesus, of course, is that our lives are never again the same after that. The Holy Spirit begins to direct us, blowing us here and there, as the Spirit wishes. Our fates are no longer ours. Our lives are no longer ours.

And that scares us. So we work really hard to keep Jesus at bay, to make him tame and non-threatening. We don't want him changing us. We like ourselves the way we are. We like being in control. We don't want to be born again, to be born from above.

And we lose out on the only true life there is. We miss the only true life there is. We reject the only true life there is.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is not one among many things we can give our lives to. He is not to be ranked somewhere among family, money, possessions, leisure, work, power, and so on. He is it. He is everything. He is all. He is first, and everything else is not even on the radar.

Nicodemus came to that realization, I believe. It didn't happen in one night, but that's when it began. He had met the living God, and he was changed. He was transformed. And he was never the same again. And he became a disciple.

Are you ready for that? Am I ready for that? Are you and I ready to grasp and live the only true life there is? If you are, then go looking for Jesus, like Nicodemus did. Allow the Holy Spirit to move you where it will.

Learn to live with confusing questions. “How can this be?” Learn to live with Someone else in control.

Learn to live.