

First Presbyterian Church
John 3:1-17, “Once More, With Feeling!”
by Pastor Matt Johnson 5/30/2021

This Trinity Sunday we have a chance to explore a passage which contains one of the most famous verses in all of scripture:
John 3:16.

This is a verse with a clear meaning to many of us, but as we’ll see the message of Jesus often came at two levels – one easy to understand and another more challenging, even for well-trained religious types.

So let’s not allow familiarity cloud our hearing of God’s word to us today.

At the outset of this story, Jesus is talking with this guy named Nicodemus. Who is he and who is the community that he belongs to?

In verse 1, John starts off with this story telling technique that kind of puts the narrator’s voice in hushed tones,
“Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.”

This gives us some really good clues about who this guy is.

First, he’s a Pharisee. These folks are pretty well known to many of us. They are a guild of religious teachers who are hard-core traditionalists. They are reacting to rule of Rome and the influence of Hellenism by becoming hyper vigilant in their adherence to Torah, the Law.

Second, he’s a member of the Sanhedrin, which the TNIV helps us out with by calling it “the Jewish ruling council.”

The Sanhedrin was a collection of 71 judges who made up the Jewish legislative body and the supreme court. Important folks.

Now we move to verse 2: **“He came to Jesus *at night* and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”**

Coming to meet Jesus at night shows that Nicodemus is worried
about either his Pharisee buddies,
or his Sanhedrin buddies knowing
that he was having a private conversation with Jesus.

The other thing we see in verse 2 is that
even though he's afraid of this encounter being seen,
he still represents a group of some sort.
He says, "***we know that you are a teacher from God.***" We know.

This shows me that Nicodemus is providing Jesus with
the insider consensus that nobody will admit to in public.
We see this constantly in politics.

Coming at night means Nicodemus is giving Jesus his honest perspective.
And it means that there are more like Nicodemus
who are open to Jesus' ministry, but aren't brave enough
to support him publicly.

**The next question is, how does Jesus engage this community
of nearly-believers and their representative Nicodemus?**

In verse 3 he engages them by playing with their assumptions.
He comes at them with some word-play, an unexpected angle:
**"Very truly I tell you, no one can see
the Kingdom of God without being born...again."**

At least that's how Nicodemus hears it.
The Greek word for again can also mean, "from above."
In fact the NRSV translates it as "from above"
in this verse and in verse seven.

Jesus is saying, "You need to be born *from above*
to see the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus,
you need a fresh start for your soul that only comes from God,
not just getting excited because of the miracle's
you see me perform.
You need to be born *from above.*"

He hears Jesus say, “you need to be born *again*.”

So he replies to the literal meaning of Jesus words,
**“How can anyone be born when they are old?
Surely they cannot enter a second time
into their mother’s womb!”**

Rather than clear things up, Jesus comes back with still more word-play.
While Nicodemus speaks of *entering* a mother’s womb,
Jesus comes back with this,

**“Very truly I tell you, no one can *enter*
the Kingdom of God without being born
of water and the Spirit.”**

So Jesus is talking about what God desires to do,
while Nicodemus is hearing the things that pertain to the world,
and the impossibilities of starting over again
in your mother’s womb.

It reminds me of the old line from the music world
when an orchestra has played a piece accurately enough
but it lacks any kind of transcendent spark or insight
the conductor calls out, “Once more, with feeling!”

Nicodemus understands Jesus’ words clearly enough at one level,
but he shows no depth of insight regarding what Jesus really means.

Jesus’ tries again from another angle –
“once more, with feeling Nicodemus!”

Jesus says in verse 7,
**“You shouldn’t be surprised at my saying,
“You must be born *from above*.”**

**The wind blows wherever it pleases—you hear its sound,
but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**

Again, Jesus brings some puzzling language to Nicodemus.

Language that gets inside and subverts the way
he and his group normally think.

The Greek word for “wind” and the Greek word
for “Spirit” are the same word.

Is it the wind that’s blowing, or the Spirit that’s blowing?

Is the sound the whistle of the wind,
or the word of God spoken through the only begotten Son?
For Nicodemus, and often times for us, it’s hard to tell.

Being born from above, getting a new start,

isn’t something that can be programmed or planned out
anymore than we can determine where the wind comes from
or where it’s going.

Those who truly follow Jesus don’t just get wowed by his miracles,
they don’t just get caught up in his celebrity status (or lack of it),
they submit themselves to be blown by the Spirit of God,
wherever it might come from
and wherever it might take them.

And that can make Spirit filled people unpredictable to the world around.

This is where the whole question of change comes into the picture.

Am I able to change?

Really deep down is it possible for my entire sense of self,
for the very source of my direction in life to be changed?

Is it possible for a whole group of people

like me to be made radically new from the inside out,
to be born from above?

Nicodemus doesn’t see how it’s possible.

He says in verse 9, “How can this be?”

Jesus says, literally, **“You are *the* teacher of Israel,
and you do not understand these things?”**

Many people think Jesus is saying here that

what he has said should be clear to a master of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Perhaps it was Ezekiel 36 that Jesus was thinking of when he said this—

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

**I will remove from you your heart of stone
and give you a heart of flesh.**

And I will put my Spirit

(which in Hebrew is also the same word for wind)
in you.”

Jesus continues his response to Nicodemus’ community
by speaking for his own community,

**“We testify to what we have heard and seen,
but you Pharisees still don’t accept our testimony.”**

At this point this clandestine encounter between two people at night
has become a conversation between two communities.

I believe it is a conversation between the eternal Triune community
of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

and the community of Nicodemus and those like him
who see Jesus as a good person,
maybe even a teacher sent from God,

but who are not yet ready to put their faith in Jesus alone.

They are not yet ready to set sail
and let the Wind take them where it will.

What about us?

It’s important to realize that as time goes on,

both individuals and communities need to be reborn from above.

What are the words we aren’t hearing as Jesus intends?

What are the opportunities Jesus would open us up to?

The traditional evangelical way of reading John 3:16

is that if you believe in Jesus, you’re born again.

Well sure, I can go along with that.

So many of us are “born again.”

But could it be that in our self-confidence and self-assurance
we are still in need of being “born from above”?

Are we trying, in some parts of who we are,
to enter again into our mother's womb
instead of seeking entrance to the Kingdom of God?

The only way for such change to take place is to stop trying to exert
such fierce control over the outcomes of our lives and ministry.
We must look with fresh eyes at Jesus
who was lifted up on the cross
and let the wind blow us to surprising places.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

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Incidentally, later on in John's Gospel,
Nicodemus appears in the light of day.
He speaks up in public, and urges the Jewish leaders
to hear from Jesus before passing judgment on him.
Could the Wind have carried Nicodemus there?

And when Jesus' lifeless body is taken down from the cross,
it is none other than Nicodemus who brings a mixture of spices
and wraps the body of our Lord with them and strips of linen.
Do you think he heard what the Wind was saying to him?

Could that leader of the Jews who was once puzzled by the words of Jesus
have found a new birth from above
that enabled him to see the Kingdom of God?

The good news is that God did not send his Son into the world
to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.
That includes Nicodemus, you, me, and our community as well.