

03.01.26 ~ 2nd Sunday in Lent

“Born of the Spirit?”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words to Ponder

John 3:1-8 ^{NLT}

Pew Bible 924

¹ There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. ² After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

³ Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

⁴ “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”

⁵ Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. ⁷ So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

Leader: These Are the Words of Jesus.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Instruction

John 3:9-17 ^{NLT}

Pew Bible 924

⁹ “How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things? ¹¹ I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won’t believe our testimony.

¹² But if you don’t believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

Leader: These Are Words of Holy Transformation!

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, we come into your house of worship for grounding, for comfort, instruction and to remember your sacrifice for us on the cross through communion. We need your presence in our lives just as we crave the fellowship of one another. On this second Sunday of Lent, we may ask the same questions as Nicodemus; how can we be born of the Spirit if we are already alive and born into this world? The

answer comes through reflection of our own faith and your Word; as we do so, let us also confess our sin and ask ourselves, are we truly born of the spirit? Help us to renew the foundations of this church and reinforce the roots of our personal faith. Speak through this message and messenger as we explore our theme. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

How does one preach on the Sunday after war breaks out again in the Middle East? Or when you've lost a sibling or a dear friend? Sadly, yet gratefully, we are way too experienced at this type of resilience and grief. Far too many Sundays in my life and my time here have I stood in the pulpit despite tough headlines, corporate and personal grief, having feelings of helplessness in times of congregational change, illnesses, and crisis. What an honor it is.

In my empathy, although I've shed many tears with you, God's Word and his presence have always lifted me up as I prepare to teach and proclaim his hope, love, joy, and peace. Even at times other than Advent! This is such a time. This Lent, especially, we need to remember those four gifts we received at Christmas. Biblically, the time frame has been 33 years that Jesus has lived, worked, grew up, taught, ministered, healed, and embraced his calling. But in our timeline, it has only been a little over two months! So, let us recall God's promises of Advent as we approach this year's Easter. God's light and love, the hope of his everlasting peace eternally and in this world, his grace and mercy are always with you.

Our deep and abiding faith is what keeps the joy in our lives on difficult days. Part of that joy today is celebrating communion with one another to remember Christ's sacrifice for our human sin. These practices of worship, community prayer, singing hymns, offering our resources, fellowship, and breaking bread together are especially meaningful and

necessary during Lent or times of distress. So, let us hear what Jesus has to say to Nicodemus' questions.

As you watch the news coverage of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Jaffa, and even Iran, think about the painting image on the front of our bulletin. Here we have Nicodemus and Jesus on a city rooftop in the moonlight having a discussion. Nicodemus came to speak with Jesus privately at night, so they went up to the rooftop for the cool, fresh air, light, and privacy. Nicodemus had to be discreet because he was a Pharisee teacher and well-respected member of the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin. A few members were beginning to get uncomfortable with Jesus' teachings, healings, and other signs that could not be explained.

Nicodemus saw Jesus as a peer, a fellow teacher and Rabbi, so a discussion was appropriate. However, Jesus was not his equal on the spiritual plane, and sensed the inquiry was legitimate and for his own personal understanding. So, Jesus challenged Nicodemus that he must be born again, born anew, or be born from above (*anōthen*). The Greek words have slight nuances of meaning and would have been ambiguous. Jesus is speaking spiritually yet Nicodemus interprets it physically. They were not communicating well. Being born again was to have a spiritual transformation from sin to redemption, from the darkness to light, a complete re-do of one's life and state of being. Surrender to the heavenly father through his Son Jesus would be necessary, but to Nicodemus, this made no sense. How could a person experience a second birth through the womb of his mother? Impossible! But with God all things are possible; remember Jesus' rich young ruler teaching in Matthew 19:23-26:

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?”

²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

This is an echo of Nicodemus trying to reason out how a person could be born again. We know that only God’s Holy Spirit can regenerate human spirit. Imagine yourself as Nicodemus, a learned older man, trying to decide how to draw closer to God, not realizing he was in God’s presence as the Son, Jesus! To see the kingdom of God means to enter God’s kingdom which was the goal of every Pharisee’s obedience to the law. But for Jesus and his followers, God’s kingdom was not the one of man’s imagination or of earthly royalty. This is still a challenging subject to explain to seekers; one must surrender to the grace of God in order to have his mercy revealed. As believers we have faith and although we see elements of God’s kingdom here on earth (generosity, compassion), we will not fully comprehend God’s kingdom in heaven until we leave these earthly tents (bodies).

Nicodemus was around age 50 when he met Jesus, a bit set in his ways, and like so many at mid-life (this was late in life in Biblical times), he had lost heart at earthly things, even his friends at the Temple. He began to discern greed and ugly behaviors among its leaders. Jesus tried to explain to him that he could only see rebirth practically and physically, being bound in temple law and rules. Jesus was speaking of eternal life though, a spiritual re-birth, and Nicodemus was offended or at least

disturbed. He was transformed eventually by the signs and wonders he witnessed Jesus perform on earth and surrendered in spirit to what he would experience one day in heaven. He eventually believed their testimonies! Scholars do not know how old he was when he died, but we do know he had wealth. It was this Nicodemus who purchased and provided burial spices and herbs for Jesus in the tomb.

This view attacked his sense of honor and identity as a Pharisee much like we sometimes assume that because we go to church, we are loyal Christ-followers. In reality, a life of faith is constantly being challenged and renewed day by day. A new birth as Jesus described it would have serious earthly repercussions to his identity and lifestyle as a Pharisee and teacher. Who would he become if he followed this controversial rebel? Nicodemus was proud of his parentage and ancestry, but Jesus now says his spiritual identity was not guaranteed by his birth or lineage. This was counter-cultural and disturbing. Jesus was addressing both Nicodemus' personal conversion to a new birth and the temple's need to let go of the old laws in exchange for Jesus as the new covenant, fulfilling the law. Doesn't this ask us some of the same questions? Who are we without Jesus? Who are we with this rebirth? Are we born of the spirit or tied to the world?

Despite all the challenges Jesus posed to the Temple and Sanhedrin and his death on the cross and persecution of his disciples, the evangelist John states clearly in verses 16 and 17 the affirmation that Jesus was God's gift of love, grace, and mercy for the world: ". . . He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world

through him.” So, this Lent, I ask you, are we living by the flesh or by the spirit? Are the things in our world disrupting our flesh, the Spirit, or our faith? Let us continue to live born in the Spirit, so that we too may receive the eternal life God promised. Amen? Amen! ||

Please pray with me: Dear Lord, we thank you for your son, Jesus. Help us to digest these words and remember them when the world or we ourselves are distressed. Let us be open and willing to question but also ready to receive a spiritual and eternal answer. Strengthen the roots of our faith, the glory of Christ, and let us share it with others this season. May our spiritual practices be disciplined and informing, while our energies and missions be multiplied through your resources and community collaborations! Bring peace to the middle east we pray and safety to those we know and love. Hear our confession and please bless these elements as we remember your sacrifice on the cross for us. We pray in the holy name of Jesus, Amen.