

3.05.23 – Lent 2

“Eternal Life Illuminated”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

John 3:1-17 (NLT)

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.”

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 Powerful Words from Christ. All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 17:1-9 (NLT)

The Transfiguration

¹ Six days later Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. ² As the men watched, Jesus’ appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. ³ Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter exclaimed, “Lord, it’s wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I’ll make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

⁵ But even as he spoke, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.” ⁶ The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground.

⁷ Then Jesus came over and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸ And when they looked up, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus.

⁹ As they went back down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Leader: These are Illuminating Words of God and Jesus. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Lord in Heaven, help us to understand the Scriptures read today and how to apply them to our faith lives, especially during this season of Lent. May we remember your loving gift to us; may we seek Christ’s teachings and his intervention of eternal life in our daily walk. Let us experience the illumination of your wisdom, presence, grace, and mercy. Help us to be more curious to understand like Nicodemus. Please be with those who could not be here, as you speak through your messenger this morning. Amen.

It is fitting on communion Sunday to meet these important Biblical characters in the context of life and the kingdom to come. First, we encounter a curious Nicodemus, a respected teacher, Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin, recall, was the Jewish ruling council made up of seventy members who made religious decisions and who kept the Roman civil laws. Although there were good members like Joseph of Arimathea and Gamaliel, the Sanhedrin put Jesus on trial and eventually crucified him. We can read about Nicodemus in two ways: as the testimony of a man struggling to understand his faith through this teacher and how it might apply to our moments of questioning, or as a teaching to explain the prophecies of a Messiah sent to earth to save humankind from their own sinful destruction. Both are important, but today, you get to decide the significance for your faith journey.

John didn’t explain why Nicodemus went to Jesus at night. True that he wasn’t quite sure of this teacher, and because Jesus had begun to perform miracles and was better known, he must be cautious. However, most scholarship agrees that Jesus was rarely alone or available for a deep

conversation with one person. So, Nicodemus visited Jesus at a time when they could, as mutually learned men, discuss his purpose and teaching. Nicodemus could not quite understand what Jesus told him about being born again; his logic kept getting in the way of faith. You have probably heard many interpretations of “born again,” but this is one that made sense to me. There are two births, the first of water, which refers to one’s human physical birth from the womb or perhaps as John the Baptist was teaching, your baptism in water (after turning away from sin). The second birth is of the Spirit (he says “from above”), also a turning away from sin, but one which accomplishes a spiritual change or transformation in one’s life that overtakes mind, body, and soul. This second birth, as we know it, puts a faith discipline, a yearning to know Jesus intimately, and love for others in the place of what was sin. It brings eternal life, a new quality of life; and it was the main purpose of Christ’s coming to earth for us, as is so well known by John 3:16.

In Jesus’ explanation to Nicodemus, he almost challenges him to understand, yet has compassion as well. He asks how do we understand what makes the wind blow? We only know through observation and experience that it does blow. Jesus wants him to get it, but if he cannot understand earthly things like the wind, how can he understand heavenly things that no man can see or has experienced? Only the Son of Man knew what was to come both for him and for the people of God. The Holy Spirit he mentions would come later to help believers comprehend the possibilities of eternal life with God. The gift of eternal life comes from God’s love and salvation through Jesus Christ, while being born

again of spirit is the personal response, free choice, and heart faith to see and believe in Him though unseen.

Three disciples, Peter, James, and John got a glimpse of that eternal life when Jesus took them up to a high mountain. They often went to the mountains to pray and be away from the crowds that began to follow Jesus. Before their eyes, Jesus' countenance changed in form becoming a white vision of bright light. Then Moses and Elijah appeared to them! Some say that Moses represented all who are saved who died or will die, while Elijah represents those who never died (like himself) but who will be taken up into heaven, and the disciples represent those who will be physically present "when Christ institutes his Kingdom on earth."

Transfigured means an outward change that comes from within. We tend to use the word metamorphosis or transformation to explain the inward development occurring before outward changes in behavior happen. This is a good reason to pause and reflect during Lent. As we approach Easter, silence is helpful to pause and notice the world around us, both its beauty and its need.

According to the church calendar, Transfiguration Sunday was February 19th, but the Lectionary selected the transfiguration passage for today. The passage never clearly identifies the "high mountain." Various traditions identify both Mount Tabor and Mount Hermon as the Mount of Transfiguration. Mount Tabor is a little less than 2,000 feet, and it stands alone in the area. The earliest tradition says it is the location, so the Church of the Transfiguration was built there on the ruins of a fourth-century church. Mount Hermon is a much higher mountain, almost 10,000 feet, and it is closer to [Caesarea Philippi](#) where the previous

events in Matthew 16 took place. Some scholars feel that Mount Hermon is a more likely candidate to be the Mount of Transfiguration. While on my pilgrimage, we went up Mount Hermon about 3000 feet; the temperatures dropped 15 degrees and farther up were snow caps (www.gotquestions.org). We do not have to climb a mountain in Israel to be a witness or to be transfigured.

Typical of Peter's zealous efforts to please the Lord, he offers to build three shelters (as tabernacles) for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. But the human side of him really wanted to memorialize this moment, because surely no one will ever believe them! ⁵ But even as he spoke, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him (John 3:5)." This bright appearance of God and authentication of Jesus' purpose terrified the disciples, much as the host of angels terrified the shepherds in the fields before Jesus' birth or the burning bush did when Moses saw God on Mount Sinai. Jesus reassured them and commanded them **not** to speak of it to anyone. He reminded them as they descended the mountain that there was more work to do "in the valleys" than on the mountain. Isn't that a good reminder for us too, especially in the year of our church Anniversary?

This experience foreshadowed the Second Coming of Jesus, called the *Parousia* in Greek. There are two illuminations here: the first is the Nicodemus' faith story of a second birth for mind, body, and soul; and the second is the bright cloud affirming the power of God through Christ which brings us salvation and eternal life. We are not yet on the mountaintop; there is work to do here on earth! That is our message for today. Let us use Lent well to discern what that work is as we prepare

divine experiments in programming and service for our community. Have you added any Bible Study to your routines? Are you using Open Windows or Reflections devotional resources? Talk to me if you need ideas of how to draw closer to Christ this season. Eternal life is here on earth **as we work** if we allow God's illumination and his word into our daily lives. Let us all be born anew in Christ. Amen. ||

Will you pray with me? Creator God, help us to draw nearer to you in all our plans and divine experiments. We know you are already present here in our church, mission center, and community. Illumine our minds, energize our bodies, and strengthen our resolve to do your work here on earth. Inspire us and equip us, as we now remember your sacrifice through our memorial of the Last Supper. In Jesus' name, we pray, **Amen.**