

Change is hard. But sometimes it's a matter of life or death. In the Gospel we heard the story about Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus, how he was ultimately faced with the question, "Can you change for the sake of your own life?" This morning we're going to talk about this exchange and what it has to do with our own walk with God and one another.

OPENING PRAYER

JOHN 3:1-6

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of WATER and the SPIRIT, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Nicodemus had ISSUES. First, he was old.... Well, that doesn't have to be an issue, but it was for Nicodemus. Second, he was the "**ruler of the Jews**," which meant his job was to keep the status quo intact. In other words, he WAS an old dog and he was NOT interested in any NEW tricks!

But things had changed. We know how that feels. You're settled in, and everything is coasting along smoothly. Your family is secure. Your job is safe. Your church is normal. But then, KABLAM! something changes. It could be anything, new carpet color, new service time for worship, new pastor, anything, and it upsets our sense of organization, our sense of control. We hate change. And so did Nicodemus.

Let's put ourselves in Nicodemus' sandals: He's been serving God his entire life with every fiber of his being. But now, here's this man, this Jesus, an itinerant

evangelist with a rag tag band of followers, who seems to be telling him that what he has been doing all along was not what he should've been doing.

Nonetheless, Nicodemus was sincere when he came to Jesus, for he came to him in the night secretly, under the radar of without all the political nonsense and fanfare of his cadre of fellow religious leaders.

I think Nicodemus recognized that Christ was a prophet: Jesus was single-minded in his mission for God; everything he said echoed the prophets before him; he ministered to the hearts of the people; he was self-effacing, and there were the miracles. All the miracles all the other prophets had ever done all together didn't hold a candle too what Jesus had done in 3-years! But Nicodemus was in conflict. For there were some things in Jesus' teachings that were unlike anything he'd ever heard before.

Jesus said, **“unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”** Nicodemus must've been thinking, “He must be talking about a new program, a new regimen of holiness.” So when he asked Jesus to explain the metaphor of rebirth, he wasn't confused about whether or not one needed to LITERALLY **“enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born.”** Rather, he wanted to know what the new program was. So he threw the metaphor right back at Jesus. He wanted to know if people like himself who had spent their ENTIRE lives serving God had gotten it ALL wrong.

And Jesus said, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of WATER and the SPIRIT, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”**

Poor Nicodemus was so confused. He wanted to be obedient to God; he wanted to do God's will; he wanted to be a faithful servant of the Almighty. But instead of getting a new list of stuff to do from Jesus, the Lord told him he had to be **“born again”** of WATER and the SPIRIT.

And he cried out, **John 3:9, “How can these things be?!”** That's when Jesus taught him how to read his Bible through new lenses, illustrating his ministry with a story about Moses from 1500 years earlier.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, **John 3:14-15**, “**as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,**¹⁵ **that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**”

Here’s a Bible study tip: Whenever you read the Old Testament, think about Jesus. This is what Jesus and the Apostles teach us throughout the Scriptures. So for instance, when you read the Creation Story, think about Jesus, for He is the “**Author of Life**” (Acts 3:15). When you read about the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea during the Exodus, think about Jesus, for that miracle was a foretaste of the miracle of Baptism as St. Paul taught the church in Corinth (1st Corinthians 10:2). When you read about the sacrificial offerings on the altar in the temple in Jerusalem, think about Jesus, for He offered Himself up for our sins as the ultimate sacrifice (Hebrews 13:11-13).

When Jesus retold the story of Moses and the bronze serpent to Nicodemus he was showing him how God had been preparing him for his teaching all along.

Indeed, Nicodemus anticipated a new list of expectations from Jesus, a new path to holiness. That was how he was wired. I call this the NICODEMUS SYNDROME, which is to say the things we have experienced and learned shapes our understanding of the world, life, God, everything. In other words, Nicodemus expected, even wanted Jesus to say something like, “God loves people who obey his commandments.”

But Jesus said, “**whoever believes in (me) has eternal life.**”

With these words Nicodemus’ heart began to change. It wasn’t too much later when he found himself defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin, his own party, saying, “**Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?**” (John 7:51)

After Christ’s crucifixion, it is apparent Nicodemus’ life had been transformed. We read that he gifted the disciples with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes for the Lord’s burial (John 19:39). He had become one of them. When he saw Jesus “**lifted up,**” just as the Lord had anticipated, he was changed by a new

understanding of God's love. He changed, for the better; he had become a follower of Christ, a Christian.

Tradition teaches shortly thereafter Nicodemus was baptized by Peter and John.

When I was a young, pious, zealous Christian, my own version of the Nicodemus Syndrome crushed my heart when I realized I could not fulfill the demands of God's law. Perhaps you can relate: Our pride insists that we have a duty, a responsibility to obey God. So we spend a lot of time berating ourselves for not being able to do it.

But the Lord made us brand new through His death for our sins when he was "**lifted up**" on the Cross on Calvary. When I received this Word for myself I was changed. For I realized God loves me just as he loved Nicodemus through his Son, Jesus.

But God's work is never ending, redeeming, reawakening, and rejuvenating our hearts every day. From the Cross he came to us in the waters of Holy Baptism; he comes to us again and again when we eat his Supper; and he comes into our hearts and makes us new whenever we open our Bibles and hear the voice of Jesus.

Our lives are a series of rebirthing experiences. For every time we receive God's hope in our hearts in the name of Jesus, they are filled to overflowing, and we are made new. That's what it means to be "**born of water and the spirit.**"

Friends in Christ, this week may you have the opportunity to spend time in the Word of God, receiving it as your own into your heart, seeing Jesus on every page, knowing He is your Lord and Savior.

This week as you read this Word may you grow in faith and believe that Jesus is for you, and that all of His work was meant to bring you solace in your time of need, healing in your heart, clarity in your mind, and peace in your spirit.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.