

# Sermon: Lent 2

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Year A  
Genesis 12:1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17  
John 3:1-17

*"You must be born from above."*

Our Gospel lesson today is about questions, belief, accepting God's love and Jesus' response to Nicodemus who comes by night, in the darkness to talk with with him. The story of Nicodemus is recorded only in the book of John and follows the cleansing of the Temple and that Jesus was aware that many believed in him only because of the signs that he was doing. Those believers probably had a shallow and unstable type of faith. Perhaps the same type of faith that Nicodemus had. It was nearing the time of Passover, and Jesus was in Jerusalem, when Nicodemus came to him at night seeking answers. And my guess is that many of us have at some time during our lives have sought answers about something that concerned us too.

When I was diagnosed with cancer... I had many questions. Was I going to die from this disease? What did the biopsy report say. What surgery was necessary and what effects will the chemo and other meds have on me now and in the future? Fortunately, I had a medical and nursing team that let me ask questions until I could not think of any more to ask... and for that, I was grateful.

Nicodemus didn't get to ask as many questions as I did, but he of course was speaking to a much higher authority. So who was this Nicodemus and what did he really want to know?

We do know that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and a leader of the Jews. The word Pharisee means "to separate," and the Pharisees led lives apart from the rest of the Jewish population. They were considered the most devout of the Jews and they had

their own interpretation about how God was to be worshipped, what was to be considered Holy, and they followed rather stringent laws. Their main focus was on the Torah, the written Torah and the "oral Torah" which pertained more to instruction on everyday Jewish life. The Pharisees believed in miracles, an afterlife, and the coming of a Messiah---someday.

And, we know that Nicodemus was most likely a member of the Sanhedrin, a powerful tribunal of Jewish leaders located in Jerusalem, and who governed five districts in Judea. They had civil jurisdiction, but limited criminal jurisdiction as capital punishment cases, (like Jesus's crucifixion) had to go before the Romans.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, in the darkness and politely addresses Jesus as Rabbi. A rather unexpected greeting, as older rabbis did not address younger rabbi's with that title. The darkness could literally have meant that he came some time after sunset or it could be that Nicodemus came to Jesus because he was confused, or had some dark areas in himself, places he had not examined or challenged, or that he was in a state of unbelief.

Nicodemus knew that Jesus had God's power, he acknowledged that and he may have wanted to know more about Jesus, was he a prophet? A teacher? The Messiah? And what was his platform, what was he teaching?

Nicodemus initially uses observation and reasoning in an attempt to find out more. He uses things that are concrete, like what he can see and he relies on what he already believes. He filters things through a very structured belief system. But Jesus cuts to the chase, and says no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above and no one enters the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. The reference to water and Spirit may have been to Ez. 36:25-27, where God tells the people that he will cleanse them with water and put a new heart and new Spirit within them, a reading Nicodemus may have been familiar with. Then Nicodemus gets hung

up on a human rebirth but Jesus is referring to a spiritual rebirth, a gift from God and a gift (the Spirit) that will cause an inner transformation, a Spirit that communicates with the mind and soul.

Jesus goes on to share that the Spirit, like the wind, has effects that can be observed, but their directions are both unknown and neither can be controlled by mankind. Jesus then begins to shift the focus to himself. He refers to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness for the people to gaze upon. The people believed and knew that by looking at the serpent they would be healed and not die. Jesus likened this to himself being lifted up on a cross so that all who believed in him and the love of God would have life, eternal life, and not die.

So perhaps it was belief in Jesus, acceptance of God's love and the inner transformation by the Spirit that Nicodemus lacked. According to John Shea, it is God's love that unlocks the mind for communication from the Spirit. Nicodemus may have been blocked from receiving God's love. For him God's theology was based on laws, following rules and on God's judgement and punishment. A very legalistic approach to God. God's love, forgiveness and his desire to communicate with his creation was not part of Nicodemus' belief system and this hindered the opening of his mind to the Spirit. Accepting God's love and all that God has done and continues to do for mankind, is the key that unlocks the mind for the Spirit, a type of rebirth.

Nurya Love Parish in her article in *The Christian Century* says "You must be born again, Jesus tells Nicodemus. When you give up your own will to follow the will of God you are made new," and then you embark on a new journey, trusting in God just as Abram did.

So did Nicodemus ever move from the darkness of unbelief into the light of believing in Christ and accepting God's love. Well, we don't know for sure, but he did make two other appearances in John.

One was in defense of Jesus and the other was in taking spices along with Joseph of Arimathea for Jesus's burial.

The last part of the Gospel is John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone that believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*

Martin Luther considered this the Gospel in miniature. This verse shares that God's love is inclusive, (he so loved the world, everyone) and we have a choice whether to accept that love and all that it entails. v. 17 says that he did not send his Son to condemn the world but to save it through him.

So what is the take away for us today? First I would like to say that I believe that God has a plan for all people to have eternal life. Those who die young, those who are never exposed to Christianity, those with a different sort of belief system, that they are not excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven.

Perhaps one message from this Gospel is that all transformed believers are called to action to do Gods work in the world. To help the hungry, the homeless, and all those who are the most vulnerable in our society. It may also be a call to reach out to those who are struggling with more hidden problems, like neighbors or friends who may be deciding whether to pay the heating bill or buy food, those who are taking their blood pressure medication every other day due to the high cost of prescription drugs and being on fixed incomes, those who are down on their luck, and need someone to just listen.

And it is important to be a voice for those who have none. To take a stand for refugees, to speak out against hate groups that are present in Michigan and springing up in areas of our country nationwide, to take a stand for those caught up in human trafficking, and to speak up for the homeless, and for the rights of all people. For those who are bullied at school, the workplace or on the internet. The needs are great in our world and community, and we are small, like a drop in the sea of human suffering, but at least we

are the drop. Jesus said, as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me. Lets continue to be that drop: powered by the love of God, belief in Christ and transformation by the Holy Spirit.

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