

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Born Again?”**

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*“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3).*

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and we know about them. But he is also a member of the Sanhedrin, a select group of seventy men who essentially serve as the government of Israel under Roman occupation. So, Nicodemus is a reputable, influential and recognized leader.

The Sanhedrin has heard of Jesus and is monitoring his whereabouts. I imagine they get summary reports about Him. They're told He just kind of came out of no place. He's not the product of one of the noted rabbinical schools in Jerusalem. He's the son of a carpenter in Nazareth. They're told of purported miracles and they're not sure what to make of that. They're told of growing crowds following him, and they're not sure they like that. And they're told he's ignoring their laws regarding the Sabbath and such, and they know they don't like that. They're told he's been hard on those they've sent to observe and test him; they come back with their tails between their legs. Most of Nicodemus' colleagues have already made up their minds about Jesus, but Nicodemus, is intrigued, and, privately, wants to know more.

And so, one night, after dark, when the city is quiet and he will not be seen or recognized, Nicodemus goes to the house where Jesus is staying. He takes a chance. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall. The dynamics are fascinating: this old, gray Pharisee from the Sanhedrin, part of the Jerusalem elite, coming to meet this young, carpenter's son from Nazareth.

John doesn't record the whole conversation, none of the niceties. Surely it was longer than the minute it takes to read John's report of it. John gives us only the basic framework. Nicodemus opens with disingenuous flattery. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these miracles you do unless God is with him.” Maybe Nicodemus was fishing for a compliment in return. Jesus ignores all that and gets right down to business. “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

The statement throws Nicodemus off balance. He doesn't know what to do with that. “Surely a man cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!”

Jesus continues, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Now this must have been a blow for Nicodemus. Jesus is saying his Jewish birthright offers no direct and automatic pathway to heaven. Nor does his being a Pharisee put him in the kingdom. His membership on the Sanhedrin and the esteem he carries counts for nothing before the judgment throne of God.

You must be born of Water and the Spirit or you have no part in the kingdom. Nicodemus is having a hard time with that “born again” language. Two thousand years later, we do too . . . albeit in a different way. Has anyone ever asked you, “Are you born again?” That's just about the most terrifying question you can ask a Lutheran.

It comes from a brand of evangelicalism that is not only outside our comfort zone, but one with which we do not always agree. “Are you born again?” Translate that: “I'm born again, but I'm worried about you. You are still stuck in your musty, dusty, rusty and dead traditional religion, and are in a lot of trouble. Your infant baptism counts of nothing. You must make a decision for Christ and commit your life to Him.” According to this exclusive theology, most who call themselves Christian will not make the cut.

I believe this is a wrong interpretation of the phrase “born again.” “Born again” Christians think this new birth comes when a person makes a decision and commitment to Christ. But do you see what they’ve done? They’ve turned faith into a good work, the one good work necessary for salvation. In contrast, we believe faith is essential for salvation, for sure, but faith is not a decision we make; it is the gift of God, for “No one can say Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit.” And we believe the response of the Christian begins with gratitude, not commitment. Good works and obedience will flow from that well-spring. They are not motivated by the Law of Moses, but by the Good News of Jesus Christ.

“Have you been born again?” Yes, you were. When you were baptized, you were born again of water and the Spirit. You were made new. Romans 6, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in *newness of life*” (vv. 3-5). Born again! Titus 3:5 calls it a “washing of regeneration.” And 2 Corinthians 5 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (v. 17).

Did you choose to be born the first time? No, it just happened to you. You were given life. So when the Bible calls faith and Baptism a “new birth,” it helps us understand that our relationship to God is not something we chose for ourselves. It is a gift He gives. This means if you were baptized as an infant, you never need to be baptized again, because baptism is about God’s promises to you, and God never revokes His promises. Even if you turn your back on God in unbelief for decades and then come back in repentance and faith, you don’t need to be rebaptized because God never cancelled his love for you or his promises to you.

This love and faithfulness of God is hard for Nicodemus to understand. All his life, he was told salvation was based on keeping the Law in its purity. All his life he had taught the same. Jesus has just pulled the rug out from underneath his feet. Understandably, this language of grace does not immediately register with the old Pharisee. So Jesus gives him the Good News in the most simplest of terms. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”

So beautiful! So concise. This is the massive old oak tree packed back into the acorn. This is Gospel extract.

God loves the world. The words are easy, but the concept can be difficult. How can God love the world, with all its sin and messiness? How could God love you even when you do bad things? My advice? Don’t spend too much time trying to figure out how God could love all of it. Just accept the simplicity of it. You and I, though sinful, are beloved of God. God sees the world He created has been broken by man’s sin and is riddled with death and decay. God the Father, however, will not abandon His creation, but sends down His Son and the Holy Spirit.

It’s Trinity Sunday, and the reason why this text is assigned for the Gospel today is because Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all found in this one text. The triune nature of God is also beyond our understanding; it’s a mystery to us, but it’s a mystery that saves. Some mysteries are puzzles to be solved. Others are questions to be answered. This mystery, however, is a love to be experienced. It’s a love that changes everything.

If we believe that God loves the world, then we must come to terms with the fact that our enemies may not be God’s enemies. “Love your enemies” Jesus said, “and pray for them.”

If God loves the world, then He also loves sinners. He doesn’t just tolerate them, which would be the most unloving thing to do. No, out of love for us He lays down his life for us and for our forgiveness.

God loves the world, which means he loves all of it: the ecosystem, the stars, the dogs and catbirds, ice crystals and earth worms. If you believe God loves the world, then the whole matter of environmental abuse is not only evidence of monumental stupidity but also a matter for God’s church to be concerned with. If God loves the world, it must mean he still wants us to keep the garden, protect it, restore it, and hand it off to the next generation in good order.

But the biggest difference of all is the personal one. If God loves the world, it means He also loves *you* . . . so much, in fact, that He gave His Son for you.

It's a wonderful thing to hear another say, "I love you." As Christians, what we believe and practice is really quite simple: In Jesus Christ, God has said those most wonderful words to us all. But He didn't say it just once 2,000 years ago. He says it to us again and again. When you were baptized, He said it to you. When you learned the rudiments of God's Word in Sunday School and VBS and on dad's lap, He said it to you. Every time you come to the Lord's Supper; He says it again. I love you, so this is for you, for your forgiveness and salvation.

Whatever happened with Nicodemus? In John 7, when the Sanhedrin is again discussing the Jesus problem and wanting him arrested, Nicodemus speaks up and says we don't judge a man until giving him a hearing and learning what he does (v. 51). It was a mild defense, but I think it was an act of courage, a work of his fledgling faith. His colleagues quickly turned on him with a crack that maybe Nicodemus is from Galilee too.

We don't hear about Nicodemus again until nearly the end of John's Gospel. Joseph of Arimathea goes in and asks Pontius Pilate for the body of Jesus so he can bury it. Pilate grants permission. Who is it that accompanies Joseph? It's none other than our friend Nicodemus.

Taking a corpse down from a cross is a messy business; there's no way of doing that without getting bloodied yourself. And to do that for Jesus carried additional risks. Who knows? It might have cost Nicodemus his position on the Sanhedrin. No enemy of Jesus would have taken such a risk. Nicodemus had power, wealth, influence, but was willing to lose it all.

The text says Nicodemus has brought along with him about 75 pounds of precious myrrh and aloes for the burial. (Think of heft and weight of a 75lb bag!) It would have cost him a fortune, and it was unheard of to use so much for anyone other than a king. They wrapped the body with strips of linen and the precious spices and laid it in the tomb. It makes me think of what Jesus once said, "Where your heart is, your treasure will be also." Nicodemus was putting his treasure where his heart already was. And notice, this time Nicodemus has come to Jesus not in the darkness, but in the bright light of day. And later, when he heard reports of the resurrection of Jesus, I suspect the old Pharisee wept like a new-born baby, like an old man who has been born again. Amen.