

Perhaps, Everything Happened

Text:
John 3:1-17

A sermon preached by
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John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.



“Are you saved?” That simple question causes most of us to shudder. For me it’s the fear of getting trapped in an elevator with a guy wearing big, round glasses, button down collar white shirt, skinny black tie, pocket protector carrying a big, ‘ole black dog-eared Bible. “Are you born again?”

Well, yes, as a matter of fact I am. But why do you ask? And do you think I’m answering the question in the way that you think I should be? Probably not. I’m “born again.” Are you?

Jesus answered Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus. A Pharisee who came to the Teacher at night to discuss God-stuff with him. Nicodemus who was, it seems, struggling in his own way with what being born all over again might mean.

Is Nicodemus now wrestling with his Pharisaic roots after having met Jesus in some previous exchange? It seems like he already knows something about Jesus. Maybe he's heard him teach. Maybe he's heard rumors about him. Maybe he's met some of Jesus' disciples.

Nicodemus has been trained to be a Pharisee. One wasn’t born as a Pharisee. It involved a system of beliefs and understandings as to what was important in Judaism – orthodoxy with and emphasis on the law above anything else. The Pharisees were at various times during the nearly 600 years that the Second Temple stood in Jerusalem a political party, a social movement, and a school of thought. As an adult, Nicodemus was born into these traditions – he was born again into a world that might have been different than the world of his physical birth as an infant.

As an adult Pharisee, as a teacher of the Law, Nicodemus has been re-born into this party’s concerns for holiness and ritual purity and the rightness of their interpretation of their religious tradition. Jesus tells him that in order to enter the kingdom of God, though, he needs to “born from above” – or what we usually mis-interpret in English as “born again.”

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. But Nicodemus could not hide who he was. Everything about him – his dress, the cut of his clothing, the way his beard was trimmed, his accent, it all revealed his place in society as a Pharisee. The dark of night does not hide that – it does not hide what he is anymore than his words could hide what’s inside his head and heart. He engaged Jesus with questions that show he was not afraid to be recognized. He asked questions which would have let the crowd know that he wanted to know more about Jesus.

It's quite probable that it Nicodemus was looking for a change. He was looking to be born all over again, to be recreated, made new and whole again. Maybe there were too many questions for him around the rigidity of the Pharisees, maybe he felt trapped in his current Pharisaical life and beliefs, beliefs that were suffocating his spirit and taking his breath away.

Maybe as a result of this encounter Nicodemus truly was born again – born from above – born of God’s Spirit rather than living within the life suppressing laws of human creation.

Born again. Born again is what some people will use derisively of church folk meaning that those people are weird, all they do is quote scripture and confront you on elevators!

True, born again is what some churches demand of their members, in order to qualify as a true believer assuming the phrase is self-explanatory, as if every believer experienced it in the same rite-of-passage way. But demanding it to prove belief is way off track from how Jesus uses it with Nicodemus.

I know there are people outside of the church who will not deal with me because they think I must be one of those born again fanatics. But I also know there are others within the church who won’t accept me because they assume I’m *not* born again! Go figure.

Born again – born from above – born anew – is what Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be in order to see the coming realm of God.

To be “born” is hard work. In childbirth someone “bears” the load that brings us into this world. Mom. It’s not something I will ever experience so I can only imagine the tremendous work involved. A woman wrote: “She bears the pain, the labor, the weight, the responsibility. She bears with us – alien creatures, growing within her very body—and she bears all that comes with us: blood, milk, mess. We are literally born into being, and it is hard work.” So also it would be work to be born a second time.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?” asked Nicodemus, “Can one enter a second time in the mother’s womb and be born?”

There is a hint of longing in his words. Who hasn’t wished, at some point, to go back, erase, rework some chapter in life? A “do over” we used to call it. Who hasn’t yearned for a rewind button, so that the events of a particularly horrible moment might have played out differently? Who hasn’t held a baby, and thought wistfully of one’s own youth, one’s own innocence, before age and years did their burdensome work?

It can be done, says Jesus. It will take work just as any birth takes work, but it can be done. You must strip yourself of all that is dragging you down and let yourself be born into something else, something new – born of something from God.

Not a bad message for Lent, is it? Not a bad image. To let go of the old life in order to be given a new life. Joseph Campbell said it well – a quote that we used as part of our summer series this past year – “We must be willing to let go if the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”

How often Jesus uses that theme in his teaching. “What must I do to have eternal life?” a man asks Jesus. Follow the commandments, says Jesus. I have, since my youth, the man

replies. "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (Mark 10)

If you lean forward toward God's kin-dom all that God has for you will be yours – it is consistently Jesus' message. But it requires change – a new life. When he talks about the beautiful way the birds are clothed and the grass is cared for even though they do not work for money and material treasure he reminds us how much also God loves us. "These things will be given to you as well." These life giving, life nourishing, life nurturing, life sustaining things will be yours as well. Who could pass up that offer?

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is [God's] good pleasure to give you the kin-dom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12)

Well, as a matter of fact, most of us very quickly pass up that offer. We are afraid to, if I can offer you a tired old cliché, "let go and let God." We fear for the present and the future. We fear for this current life and so we cling to it unwilling to be born all over again. It's too much work.

Every time Jesus encounters someone with wealth and/or power it's the same message. Give up the old; embrace a new life. Every time Jesus heals – physically or emotionally or spiritually – that healing miracle has as its foundation the leaving of one way and the acceptance of a new way of being. "Go and sin no more." "Go, your faith has made you well." "Go tell others what God has done for you." "You have heard it said ... but I say to you." Give up the old in order to embrace the new.

I've told this story before but it fits so nicely with what's going on here that I'll share it again. conclude with this parable from "Stay for Tea, Nicodemus" by the brilliant contemporary

preacher/writer/teacher Barbara Brown Taylor. She sees this as God's call for us to empty ourselves so we can be filled anew:

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First she read everything she could get her hands on--history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lively, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer.

Finally she put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. She went to India. Everywhere she went, people told her they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, only they were not sure where he lived. She asked about him in every country on earth until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house--a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line.

She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

"Yes?" said the kind-looking old man who opened it. She thought she would die of happiness.

"I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question," she said, gasping for breath. "What is the meaning of life?"

"Please come in and have some tea," the old man said.

"No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old man said, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since his visitor did not leave any room for him to reply), and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea.

She was so busy talking that she did not notice when the tea cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall.

"What are you doing?!" she yelled when the tea burned her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk."

That is what Lent is all about. Becoming new again. Becoming born again. Lent points us toward the resurrection once again. Lent points us toward being new all over again.

The T.S. Elliott quote on the bulletin cover is the same message. In the end is our beginning. "What we call the beginning is often the end ... and to make an end is to make a beginning."

Notice it in the labyrinth that we walk or trace or imagine during this season. You start out at the beginning – you release the old – you pray the journey through – you receive anew as you come to the center – you return and end at the beginning newly born and ready to finally live.

As I was preparing for the season I came across a short piece by Spanish poet, Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958) which I thought

was appropriate for the Lenten journey. (English version by Robert Bly).

I have a feeling that my boat
has struck,
down there in the depths,
against a great thing.
And nothing happens!
Nothing...Silence...Waves...
Nothing happens?
Or has everything happened,
and are we standing now,
quietly, in the new life?

Are we standing now, quietly, in the new life? Are we? It's what Jesus challenges Nicodemus to do to find God. Let go of the old life and find the new. Does Nicodemus do it?

Nicodemus has been venerated as a saint in both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. The Eastern Orthodox and Byzantine Catholic churches commemorate Nicodemus on the Sunday of the Myrrhbearers, the second Sunday after Easter. In Roman martyrology Nicodemus is commemorated along with Joseph of Arimathea on August 31. In medieval art, there are many depictions of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea removing the dead Christ from the cross, often with the aid of a ladder.

But did Nicodemus really understand what being born all over again meant? Preacher Alyce Mackenzie puts it like this: "Spiritually he remains half in and half out of the womb, surely an awkward and painful place to be. Spiritually he remains in mid labor." Maybe he tries, but he's not quite born again.

Nicodemus comes into the picture again two more times in John's Gospel. In John 7, against the advice of "the chief priests and the Pharisees," Nicodemus defends Jesus, advising his colleagues to hear and investigate before making a final judgment against Jesus. In John 19 when Jesus is buried, Nicodemus brings an

extraordinary amount of myrrh and aloes for the embalming of Jesus' body according to Jewish custom. "Reading between the lines," writes Dr. Mackenzie, "it seems to me as if Nicodemus could never quite emerge from his old life into his new birth. Both his defense of Jesus and the extraordinary amount of burial spices have always struck me as too little, too late." He's stuck in the old life – unable to give it up in favor of the new.

Are we also? Are we stuck in the old? Are we stuck with the Pharisees believing that what we have is the only way?

I know nothing about Perry Noble or NewSpring Church which he founded about 12 years ago in South Carolina except that it averages an attendance of 10,000 people across its many campuses. But Perry Noble wrote in the *Christian Post*:

"I am a recovering Pharisee. I [often think] about who I used to be shortly after meeting Jesus. I became obsessed with religious rules and legalism and forgot all about the grace that God had poured out on me through Jesus. As I look back on that time in my life there are eight things that really defined me...

#1 – I was way more obsessed with the sins and shortcomings of others and made it my obsession to point out their faults so that I did not have to deal with my own.

#2 – I made it my goal to catch people doing something wrong and condemn them rather than seeing them with the same eyes that Jesus saw me with, thus causing me to be broken for them and reach out to them with compassion and a genuine concern.

#3 – I would not associate with anyone or any group that did not acknowledge that I was completely correct in my view and interpretation of the Scriptures ... and, if they didn't see just like me I

would attack and malign them as often as possible. Which leads to...

#4 – I only hung out/associated with people who thought just like me!

#5 – I was known more for what I attacked rather than what I built up!

#6 – I boasted in the knowledge that I possessed and looked down on those whom I perceived did not know as much as me.

#7 – I could not acknowledge anything that the Lord might have been doing that did not fit into my system of the way I believed God should do things

#8 – I did not mind throwing out false accusations against those whom I felt were not getting it right!

Maybe I don't have the same understanding as Perry Noble has – that I rejected others after I had some eye opening conversion experience. And I don't think that necessarily you must have that Paul-like experience of getting knocked off my horse but I know that I have – and I suspect most of us have – looked down on others who we don't consider as worthy of God's grace. Even when we know that God's love and forgiveness and grace are absolutely free. We still assume some people just aren't as good as I am.

It's true. You know it's true.

We stay with the old ways even when we know Jesus calls us to a new way of being.

But here is Lent. Be born anew. And once born anew, know that indeed everything happened. And you are standing quietly now in your new life.

Amen.