

John 3:1-21

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus 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?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The 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.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

‘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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘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.

‘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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are

¹ This sermon owes much to a commentary by Rev. Mary Luti at <https://sicutlocutusest.com>.

what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

A writer named Phillip Yancy tells the story of a young able-bodied German evangelical student named Reiner. Reiner returned home after graduating from bible college in the United States, and he taught at a camp for the disabled. There, relying on his notes from a college course, he gave a stirring speech on the Victorious Christian Life.

“Regardless the circumstances of your life, there is nothing that you cannot achieve! You can have anything you want! God lives within you!” he told his audience of paraplegics, cerebral palsy patients, and the mentally challenged. He was a little disconcerted, speaking to people with poor muscle control. Their heads wobbled, they slumped in their chairs, they drooled.

The campers were just as disconcerted listening to Reiner. Some of them went to the director of the camp and complained that they could make no sense of what he was saying. The camp director told them, “Speak with Reiner.”

One brave woman got up her courage and confronted Reiner. “It’s like you’re talking about the sun, and we’re in a dark room with no windows. We can’t understand anything you say. You talk about simply overpowering all obstacles with faith and confidence alone. That’s not how our lives work.”

Reiner was crushed. It all seemed so clear. He was quoting from Paul’s letters. Didn’t that mean everything he said was right?

His pride was wounded, and he thought about returning the next day with some kind of a rhetorical blunt instrument: “There’s something spiritually wrong with you people. You need to grow in the Lord. You need to triumph over adversity.”

Instead, after a lot of prayer, Reiner returned the next day with a different message. He stood in front of the campers and admitted, “I don’t know what to say. I’m confused. Without the

language of Christ as victory over everything in life, I don't know what to say." He stood there and hung his head.

The woman who had confronted him finally spoke up from what was becoming a congregation. She said, "Now we understand you. Now we are ready to begin."²

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.

Some writers say that's because, in the Gospel of John, light represents God and Jesus and wisdom, and darkness represents ignorance, sin, and confusion. That would certainly cast Nicodemus's visit in a particular light.

Other writers say that it's simpler than that: Nicodemus fears being socially ostracized for coming to Jesus, so he comes at a time when nobody would see him. If that's true, then Nicodemus seems to have gotten over it: we later see him arguing with other Pharisees for giving Jesus a fair trial, and then he buries Jesus after his death.³

But there is a third possibility, that a professor named Mary Luti pointed out.⁴ That possibility is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night simply because he is a Pharisee. Truly devout Pharisees studied the Scriptures every night. The first Psalm says that "their delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on the Law, they meditate by day and night."⁵

This evening, Nicodemus comes to Jesus. He has heard about the signs that Jesus has been doing, and he believes that he has Jesus sorted into the right box. "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."

² My paraphrase from Phillip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (2000), end of Chapter One.

³ John 7:50-52 and John 19:38-42, respectively.

⁴ <https://sicutlocutusest.com>

⁵ Psalm 1:2

Jesus does not fit in Nicodemus's box. He starts talking about being born from above, and he ignores Nick's protests that being born again makes no sense.

The Holy Spirit goes where it wants to, and we can hear it, or see it at work, but we cannot control it, or even track it. That's the way it is with people who are born from the Spirit. The Spirit is not subject to our rules and regulations.

Eventually, Nick just stands there and hangs his head, and asks, "How can these things be?"

Now he is ready to begin.

Nicodemus comes from a community, the Pharisees, who pride themselves on knowing things—the Law, the oral tradition, the customs, the prophets, the prophecies. "Rabbi, I understand," he says to Jesus. "I know who you are, I know what you do, I know why."

We have people today who are sure that they know everything that there is to know. They are free to speak for God, because they understand God, and they are free to speak God's judgment on anyone whom they themselves don't like. These people would fit right in with the community Nicodemus is from.

But Jesus doesn't care about what Nick knows. He cares about Nick. He wants to save Nick, and to do that, he first has to undermine what Nick understands as his life, undermine all the sensible, reasonable things that are getting in the way of his recognizing what God is doing in the world. And at the end, when all Nicodemus can do is throw up his hands, ...

Now he is ready to begin.

Jesus explains that not everything fits in Nick's boxes. Not everything is one-size-fits-all. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."⁶

Not everything in life and death is susceptible to our reason and our understanding.

Nicodemus lives today in everyone who has ever run headlong into the limits of our reason and understanding in the death of a child.

In the helplessness of addiction.

In the panicked feeling that no one will ever love us the way that we feel we ought to be loved.

In the train wreck that is the end of a career, or a marriage.

In the constant feeling of rejection in prayer that seems not to be answered.

In the dull grayness of depression.

In despair over the world's seemingly endless spiral of ever-escalating greed and violence.

In the face of implacable death.

Nicodemus lives in everyone who has come to the end of our reason and understanding. Nick lives in everyone who has come to the end of what fancy doctrine and our pictures of God and what we learned in Sunday School can explain.⁷ Nick lives in everyone who has hit the limits of our wisdom and understanding of the world, hit those limits hard, and is reduced to standing there in humiliated surrender, with nothing to say. Everyone who has stood at that point long enough, humanly enough, without any defenses or rationalizations, to finally hear a voice speak up out of the silence and say, "Now you are ready to begin."

⁶ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.

⁷ Yes, what we learned in Sunday School is doctrine. It may or may not be good doctrine, but it is doctrine.

Nick lives in each of us, who, facing every day the distinct limits of our knowledge, begin again every day.

Listen to what Jesus said to Nicodemus, once he was ready to begin: “This is how much God loved the [whole] world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one ...[has to] be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again.”⁸

We do not understand God. As human beings, created by God, we are not even capable of understanding God.

Part of the good news here is that we don’t have to!

We don’t have to understand God. We ought to try to learn about God. Our Sunday School classes and FAM Sessions and Wednesday evening classes are a good thing. Wanting to learn about God is an expression of loving God. But we don’t have to ever get to the point where we completely understand God.

What we need to understand is what Jesus told Nicodemus: God loves the whole world. God loves the whole world so much that God sent his only Son, the only one he’s got, down here to be born, live, die, and be resurrected, to save the whole world.

That includes you. Let me tell you who you are. The most important part of your identity is not reflected on your driver’s license, or your passport.

You are a Child of the Almighty God. God loved you before you were capable of loving God back, and that’s okay. God knows you better than you know yourself. God knows everything there is about you, and God loves you more deeply than you understand, more deeply

⁸ John 3:16-17, *The Message*.

than you can understand. I cannot tell you how God can love such a deeply flawed person as myself that much, but God does.

And God loves you that much.

And God wants all of us to love the world God created and the other people God created, too.

This simple, profound truth is what allows us to get up every day, recognizing that we don't have all the answers. This is what allows us to be born again from above every day. This is what allows us to "fake it 'til we make it," practicing God's grace in our lives as best we can.⁹ Doing the best we know how until we know better, and then doing better.¹⁰

So, this next week, remember who you are. Remember how much God loves you. Do the best you can to love all the other people whom God created. And, when you don't succeed, or you run into something you don't understand, give it to God, and start again tomorrow.

AMEN

⁹ Bill and I have a number of friends in common.

¹⁰ Thank you, Maya Angelou.