

LENT: A Seeker's Journey

From Darkness Into Light

John 3:1-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For your consideration: Nicodemus is an excellent role model for those of us who consider ourselves progressive Christians. That probably deserves some explanation, because I'm not calling us a bunch of pharisees. Nicodemus is most often portrayed as either a coward, in coming to speak with Jesus under the cover of darkness, or as someone a bit slow, as in misunderstanding what it means to be "born from above" or "born anew" or even as some biblical translations state, "born again." All of these are legitimate translations of the intentionally ambiguous Greek word used by the gospel writer.

Here's a different way to consider Nicodemus, who as a Jewish pharisee was obviously well-educated and an expert in the laws of Moses. **Nicodemus was a seeker.** In fact, we might call him the Patron Saint of Seekers. What is a seeker? A seeker is someone who wants to know more, and not just out of simple curiosity. A seeker is someone not quite satisfied with the status quo or with the standard answer given to tough questions. **A seeker's mind is restless, looking behind and beneath for new discoveries, new ways of understanding, new ways of interpretation, whether they be intellectual or spiritual in nature. If this describes you, then yes, you too are a seeker.**

Many have defined the times we are living in as a time of spiritual seekers, more and more of whom are doing so outside traditional and institutional religious boundaries. Like Nicodemus, many – including a majority of us connected with this community of faith – are on **a pilgrimage of discovery.**

What is Jesus' response to seekers? Jesus? You may have noticed that he recognizes and receives Nicodemus as someone on a pilgrimage and journey as a sincere spiritual seeker. **Jesus welcomes him and his searching mind.** That's one of the things that makes progressive Christianity not something new, but something that diverges from traditional religious orthodoxy. Yes, on this level, Nicodemus is a progressive pharisee! Why? **He is willing to risk leaving behind the truth he has known in order to explore something new.** Jesus invites him into a new realm of thought and insight. Jesus takes Nicodemus seriously even as he pushed him far beyond his comfort zone. I would suspect something similar has been the experience of many of you here at College Hill.

Nicodemus deserves credit, therefore, for his questioning curiosity and the courage it took to seek out this new teacher and preacher, named Jesus, that he's heard such good things about. And perhaps most importantly, and this is key, **Nicodemus had the necessary humility to be willing to hear and learn new things.** Jill Duffield, writing a commentary for this biblical passage in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, suggests the following.

I wonder if we need to take on the posture of Nicodemus this Lenten season. I wonder if we need to go from what we know in order to see the new thing that God will show. I wonder if we shouldn't go looking for those who might not pat us on the back and tell us we're great, but instead will point out to us where we have missed the mark and failed to see the evidence of the Holy Spirit's working.

Few things are more frightening. Few things are more faithful. But if this leader of the Jews, this learned Pharisee, can do it, maybe we can, too.

It's no accident that the author of the Gospel of John sets the scene for the clandestine meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus under the cover of darkness. **Darkness, in this gospel, has deep theological meaning. Darkness is the spiritual state of not yet understanding or accepting that Jesus represents the realm and kin-dom of God in our midst.** Understanding and accepting that God is in our midst, as represented in and through the life and ministry of Jesus, defines the journey from darkness into light. This is reflected in the story by Nicodemus' misunderstanding that to be born anew isn't a physical thing, but a matter of being spiritually born from above, or born again, or born of God. Why from above? In the ancient gospel writer's worldview, God is above us. Since he believes Jesus is God in the flesh come down to earth, Jesus, therefore, had to come "from above."

Another way to say this is that **Jesus came from God's realm, and inaugurated that realm among us in the here and now. That means we are experiencing eternal life right now.** It's not just a hereafter thing. Being born anew, as in recognizing that we too are from the realm of God, is a spiritual experience available to all, but perhaps most needed by religious people who might think they do not need such a transformation of heart and mind (i.e. those who are legalistic like the Pharisees and believe they have nothing else to learn). If you find yourself among those who are uncomfortable with the evangelical notion of being "**born again Christians,**" (as I am now, even though it is something I once embraced) then what does this text mean in our progressive way of understanding scripture and a life of faith? Well, as you might imagine, it has less to do with what you believe, and more to do with putting Jesus' teachings into action.

It is the love of God, love of self, and love of others that reflects our being born again, born anew, born from above, born of God. And remember, in this gospel story it all begins with Nicodemus cultivating the humility of a seeker. This approach to a life of faith is necessary in our own pilgrimage and journey from darkness into light. **Many of us here this morning, for instance, have felt transformed in our journey of faith as we have looked beyond the traditional ways of understanding scripture and ancient church doctrine and dogma.** We should have no problem, therefore, with declaring our own sense of being born again, born anew, born from the realm of God.

Now, I suppose I should mention at this point something about a little verse tucked into this story. Perhaps you've heard of **John 3:16**. Why don't you say it along with me, in the King James English, of course.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (KJV)

Martin Luther, the great reformer, called this verse "the gospel in miniature." And many still find in this one verse a summary of the entire gospel message in a nutshell.

Most modern biblical scholars, however, don't agree that this was the gospel writer's full meaning for these words in context. **John 3:16, more accurately, functions as a theological reflection upon the meaning of God, through Christ, coming into the world. When it comes to interpreting this verse, first and foremost it is about God's action, not ours. It is primarily about God's grace – not our beliefs.**

By virtue of loving the entire world, God sent us One who would reveal just how much we are loved by God. It is the recognition of that love that transforms lives. It's what allows us, to quote Bishop John Shelby Spong, to live life fully. Or, what this gospel writer calls abundant life. And it reminds us that the imagery of eternal life in the Gospel of John is as much or more about the 'here' as it is about the 'hereafter'. **Salvation, when understood this way, is not simply an intellectual, or even emotional acceptance of doctrinal statements that theologians (including the gospel writers) believed about God and Jesus** For we are told in verse 17 that God sent the One named Jesus not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. It's crucial to notice that **it is the world (kosmos in the Greek) that God so loves.** As one biblical commentator states,

It was not a particular nation or a certain people; it was not just the good people; it was not only the people who loved God; it was the world. That includes the person who loves God and the person who never thinks of God, the person who finds rest in the love of God and the person who turns away from the love of God - all are included in this vast inclusive love, the love of God.

Here, then, is a way to see the gospel in a nutshell: **God doesn't pick and choose who to love. Everyone is loved, and loved equally and unconditionally by God. This, in part, is what Jesus came to reveal. Yet, with that understanding, we are called to respond by following and living a new way of life – being born anew.** Again, realizing and internalizing this has the power to transform our lives. For in this story, the message that cries out is one of acceptance: **God's acceptance of us – of you and me.** This message is so important that it lies at the heart of the second bullet point of our congregation's Mission Statement: "Receive and openly share the love of God."

I want to close with this. **There are many people in our society today, perhaps even yourself at times, for which self-acceptance may be one of life's biggest struggles. At the heart of the gospel, however, is God's acceptance of us.** The gospel writer's point in this story is that God's acceptance of us should and must have an impact on how we view ourselves and our own identity as a beloved child of God, and then how we act, how we relate to God and each other, and how we view the world.

Our world, our very selves, cannot remain the same when we realize that we are loved with a love that will not let us go. Our journey and spiritual pilgrimage, then, is indeed similar to the seeker Nicodemus' in that it is one from darkness into light...more light. I'm glad we're on this pilgrimage together!

Amen.

Resources:

"2nd Sunday in Lent – Looking into the lectionary with Jill Duffield," *Presbyterian Outlook*, 2017.

Feasting on the Word

SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 2, March 2, 2020

Patricia Farris, *Late Night Seminary: John 3:1-17*, January 30, 2002