

“Nick at Night” John 1:1-21

May 27, 2018

As we continue our study in John’s gospel, we come to what is perhaps the best-known chapter in the gospel, and perhaps the best-known verse in the Bible, John 3:16! I hope after spending some time with it this morning, you will understand why this chapter has spoken to so many people. And I hope it will speak to you. So, let’s jump right in to chapter 3!

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”<sup>4</sup> 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?”<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.<sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.<sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”<sup>10</sup> Jesus*

*answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" (John 3:1-10)*

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a small sect of Jews who believed that God's law as found in the first five books of the Bible contained everything needed to live a perfect life, so they committed themselves to living according to every detail of it. If you wonder how hard that might be, you might want to watch the CBS sitcom, "Living Biblically," in which a married film critic decides to change his life and live according to the Bible after his friend dies. It's not a very good show, but it does demonstrate how difficult it is to live by biblical commands and values. And Nicodemus did that in spades.

He was also a leader, meaning he was a member of the Sanhedrin, a 70-member council that functioned as a Jewish supreme court. He came to see Jesus at night, perhaps so he wouldn't be seen by others, or maybe just to find a time when Jesus wasn't surrounded by crowds. He treated Jesus as an equal, calling him "rabbi" or teacher. And he acknowledged that the signs or miracles that Jesus was doing must be coming from God. A very respectful start to their conversation. But Jesus' response to him seems to come out of nowhere! "*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*" (John 3:3) Part of the reason for the abruptness of this reply is that John has telescoped a

lengthy conversation into one we can read in two or three minutes! The other reason is that Jesus isn't interested in a theological debate. He immediately challenges Nicodemus to think about the condition of his soul. He refers to the Kingdom of God, that realm where God's will is done. The Kingdom of God takes place here on earth in small ways now, but will one day encompass the whole earth! Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to "see" or participate in this Kingdom, he must be born from above, or born again- the phrase can be translated either way.

Now, pause for a moment to think how this would have sounded to Nicodemus. He had spent his entire life carefully studying every minute implication of God's law, and living according to it. He had made many significant sacrifices in order to do so. He even taught God's law to others! And now, Jesus is in essence telling him that he needs to start over! That what he has been doing doesn't count for anything when it comes to seeing God's kingdom. Nicodemus reacts, probably defensively. Taking Jesus' words literally, he asks, "How can anyone be born a second time?"

Jesus doesn't back off! *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'* (John 3:5-7)

Here, Jesus raises and addresses a crucial human question: Can people really change? It's a question that many of us ask when we think about criminals, about people who cheat on their spouses or significant others, about people who lie, or gossip, or who are always negative or critical, or who are addicts. Can such people really change? Can we change? Jesus implies that naturally speaking, we can't, when he says "What is born of flesh is flesh." And that's the problem he sees when he looks at the soul of Nicodemus. Here was someone who was the embodiment of the best that first-century Judaism had to offer. He followed the law and all its requirements scrupulously. But none of that had the power to change the human heart, which is tainted by sin through and through. What's needed is not more rules to live by, but a transformation of the heart, the soul, the essence of a human being. And we can't change it ourselves. Some of you have tried! You've tried meditation, self-help programs, therapy, pharmaceuticals, etc. They can all be helpful, but they can't change the self-centered bent of our hearts.

Sounds pretty bleak, doesn't it? And it would be, if it were the end of the story. But there's more! A power outside ourselves, a spiritual power, the power of God is able to transform our hearts. We can be re-born from above. And everyone needs that, not just pagan Gentile sinners of Nicodemus' day, but the holiest of Jewish people, too. Not just the worst

offenders in Gettysburg, but Presbyterians who were baptized as infants, confirmed as youth, who have even taught Sunday school, sung in the choir, gone on mission trips, and pastored your church! Each one of us is in need of spiritual transformation. But, how? We'll get there, but first Jesus tells Nicodemus about how when the wind blows we can't see it or know where it is coming from, but we know it is there. In the same way, the Spirit blows wherever it will- presumably on Jews and Gentiles alike- and we see its effect in the lives it changes. This was revolutionary then and it's revolutionary now. Jesus continues to speak to Nicodemus.

<sup>11</sup>*“Very truly, I tell you, we (notice the change to “we” here- maybe Jesus and the disciples?) we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you (“you” is plural here- other Pharisees?) you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:11-15)*

Jesus marvels that they can't understand these basic spiritual truths, even when the Son of Man, who has come from heaven, has explained them. And then verse 14 refers back to a strange event in Israel's history,

when the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness, having left Egypt, and were being plagued by poisonous snakes and were dying from the bites. God told Moses to make a snake out of bronze and lift it up on a pole. If the people looked on the snake (and believed in God's power) they would be healed. Jesus compares this to how he will be lifted up on the cross and those who look on him and believe will also be saved.

Now we come to the very heart of the matter, John's summary of his whole book, the summary of the gospel, and an answer to the question about how we can experience spiritual transformation and the new birth.

<sup>16</sup>*"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. (John 3:16)*

Walk through this verse with me. "For God." You probably didn't know that John was a Presbyterian, but here it is. God is the one who takes the initiative in our salvation, in changing our hearts, in making us new people. It doesn't start with us! It begins with God. That is very Presbyterian!

And God is motivated by love: "For God so loved." It's not because of anything we've done to impress him or earn his love. No. God loves us because it is in the very nature of God to love. In fact, God loves the world! This would have been a surprise to John's Jewish readers, for in the Old Testament God's love was almost always reserved for his people, Israel.

They believed that others may be loved by God too, but through Israel. But here, God loves the world, Jew and Gentile alike.

And this loving God gave his only Son, the “Word” of John chapter 1. And we know that his only Son, Jesus, became a human being and lived among us and was put to death as a common criminal. Why? “*So that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” All this was done for our benefit! Now the verb “believe in” is a favorite of John, and it’s a very important one. It doesn’t just mean to agree with or intellectually assent to something. It means to put your whole trust in something.

In the photos of the South Carolina mission trip that we saw earlier in the service, there was one picture in which Ken Elledge is stepping from one ladder over to another ladder about two stories above the ground. We do not recommend this! However, Ken was demonstrating John’s understanding of “believe in” when he stepped from one ladder to the next! He was putting his full faith in the second ladder, trusting that it was set up correctly and would support him. Saving faith is like that. John is saying we leave behind the first ladder of trusting our good deeds to impress God enough so that we’ll be allowed to enter his kingdom, and instead step onto the new ladder of trusting in what Jesus has done and will do on our behalf

to forgive our sins and shape us into the kind of people God created us to be. “Believe in him,” John says.

And those who “believe in” God’s Son, Jesus, will have eternal life. This is another favorite phrase of John. It doesn’t just mean life after death. It refers to a new quality of life that begins now, an abundant life empowered by the Spirit that continues on after death. We’ll talk more about that in future weeks.

So, maybe you’ve grown up in the church, been baptized, confirmed, and even served in the church, but you’ve never allowed yourself to be transformed by the Spirit of God. You’ve never been “born from above,” to use Jesus’ words to Nicodemus. Or, maybe you’ve got little or no church background, but you’ve struggled to make changes in your life that you know would be good for you and for those close to you. In either case, Jesus invites you to entrust your life to him, to ask him to forgive your sins, and make you into the kind of person you were created to be, so you can experience the kind of life you were designed to live. If you would like to do that, just talk to God in silence as we pray together. Ask God to forgive your sins, and God will forgive them- all of them!- and God will begin the process of shaping you into the kind of person you were intended to be. It’s the starting point of spiritual transformation!