

Second Sunday of Lent
February 17, 2008
Rev. Susan J. Morrison

John 3:1-17

³Now 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 Chosen One. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Chosen One must be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that God gave an only begotten 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.

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Thank you, Nicodemus, for telling us your story, up front and personal. It’s like hearing the original version of Nick at Night!

Nicodemus is the first of a number of people whom we will meet this Lent whose lives are touched by Jesus. Each one’s story is different and yet each share the same experience of having their life transformed because they were touched by Jesus Christ. It is my hope, that as you hear the stories of Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman, and the man born blind, and Lazarus, that you will remember times when Jesus’ touched your life and made all the difference. Each week there will be time at the end of the sermon for the sharing of testimonies. May you have the courage to tell others how God is working in your life.

Today, we begin with Nicodemus. I don't know about you, but I like Nicodemus. I can relate to this man. In fact, it's like he is one of us. He could slip in the side door of the sanctuary, take his seat in a pew, and if he had on a shirt and jeans, you would not be able to tell that he was not one of us.

Nicodemus is a teacher. He is a leader of his community. He was part of the religious establishment of his day. He knew the law and tried very hard to follow the rules of his Jewish tradition and was not one to make waves. Yeah, we "get" Nicodemus. After all, we're people who work and tend our professions and other endeavors to keep our family together and to help make the church and our communities function well. We're not around to upset the world or turn things up-side-down. We try to do what we know is right so as not to break any laws.

Also, like Nicodemus, we are people who are curious about Jesus. You would not be here today if you didn't have a certain curiosity, a certain desire to know and understand Jesus Christ. Now, one thing that's different, is that Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night whereas we come to Jesus every Sunday in the day light. Most commentators point out that this setting of darkness indicates Nicodemus' desire for secrecy, his not wanting anyone to know he is visiting Jesus, because being seen with Jesus might get him in trouble with his Jewish friends. After all, this Jesus was beginning to make a reputation for himself and was already a threat to both the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman officials. Being seen with Jesus might risk Nicodemus' good standing and reputation with his friends and associates. Come to think of it, maybe we are a bit like Nicodemus. How many of us keep our relationship with Jesus in the dark? How many of us talk about our relationship with Jesus with others – at work, at home, with our friends and relatives? Of for that matter, right here this morning among fellow Christians? How many of us witness "in the day light" about the difference that Jesus makes in lives?

Carl Schenck makes another point about Nicodemus coming to visit Jesus in the night.* He suggests that John's use of the darkness suggests that when Nicodemus first came to meet Jesus, Nicodemus himself was in the dark. He was clueless about the true power that Jesus had to offer him. He had a sense that this rabbi was someone of great importance and he came to meet him to try to understand him better.

Nicodemus was also a person who was very confused by Jesus. He thought he knew everything that God could and could not do. In a sense, he had God in a box. He applied his intellect, his learning, his interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures to God and with that information he thought that he had all the answers. And then Jesus says some things that really confuse Nicodemus.

I love the way that the conversation begins. Did you notice how Nicodemus and Jesus literally talk right past each other? Nicodemus begins the conversation by stating that he knows that Jesus must have come from God, because the miracles that Jesus has been performing could not be accomplished apart from God. And then Jesus replies "Nicodemus, if you want to know the kingdom of God, if you want to see it, taste it, be a part of it, you must be born from above." Nicodemus must have felt like a person who gets up in the morning and asks "What's for breakfast?" and the other person responds by giving the long range weather report for the coming week! The conversation just doesn't connect. Nicodemus is confused.

* I am grateful for the inspiration that Carl Schenck from Columbus, MO provided for this sermon. His comments can be found in *Lectionary Homiletics*, February 1999.

In this conversation, Jesus knows that the big question for every pious Jew is: What must *I do* to enter God's kingdom? He also knew that every pious Jew believed that by following the religious laws, and offering proper sacrifices, and performing certain rituals, one would move in the right direction toward entering the kingdom of God. And so this is the question that Jesus answers in his response to Nicodemus and by doing so, Jesus confronts the traditional view that one can do something to get into the kingdom of God. His comment suggests that it is something far different that will allow one to enter the kingdom. He tells Nicodemus that one must simply be born from above. Now this word "above" has many meanings. The Greek word is "*anouthen*" and our English text translates it as "above." But this word also means *again* or *anew*. It is also the same word for both *wind* and *spirit*. The point that Jesus is trying to make is that our being born again or born anew is nothing that we can do. We cannot accomplish our own salvation no matter how hard we try. Neither can we do anything to deserve it. This gift of grace that transforms our lives is a gift that only God can give us. It is God's unconditional love, poured out for us. **All we have to do is believe that God so loved the world, that God sent God's only Son, not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.**

Nicodemus responds to Jesus' wisdom. But his response underscores his limitations, his inability to get out of the box of his temporal understanding. "How can anyone be born again?" he asks. "How can anyone climb back into his or her mother's womb? I'm an old man. I can't possibly be born again!" Nicodemus hears and understands only on a literal level. Jesus speaks to him about spiritual matters on a spiritual level and Nicodemus misses the point.

Ah yes, we like Nicodemus don't quite understand. It's beyond what our minds can fathom. Jesus is dismantling our nicely constructed boxes about what we think we know about God and is wandering dangerously into the wild and unexplored territory of the Spirit. Just what does it mean to be "born from above?" Can we grasp the fact that being saved, that being transformed by Jesus' love is God's gift of grace to us? It simply comes to us when Jesus touches our lives.

Grace! Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound! Grace! That's what we receive when we are born again, born anew, born from above. And receiving it is something like feeling the wind. We don't know from whence it comes or where it goes. But we can experience it, feel it. We can experience grace, the power of the Spirit in our lives. We can't know it by thinking about it, trying to understand it in our heads. This is not about logic! We know it through our experiences and our heart. There's a wonderful line in the movie *The Bucket List* - a movie, by the way, that I would highly recommend. Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman are having a conversation about faith. Morgan is telling Jack that it's simply a matter of believing. Jack responds "You know, I just can't get my head around it. And Morgan quips "Did you ever think that maybe your head is in the way?"

Being born again is all about our experiencing Jesus' touch in our lives. It has little to do with our heads and a lot to do with our hearts.

Now some have tried to put the “born again” experience in a box. Being “born again” has become a slogan and rallying point for a whole segment of contemporary Christians. The validity of a person’s faith is frequently judged by whether or not one has been “born again.” Those who have not had this private moment of conversion and who do not embrace certain specified beliefs are labeled as unbelievers. I revolt against such exclusivism. It is arrogant to assume that we have the right to judge another’s experience of the Divine. There are many paths to God and we are each touched by the Divine in different ways. Some of us have had a faith experience that has been dramatic and life-changing, experiences that might be described as being “born again.” For others of us, being “born again” has been a life-long process that began at our baptism and continues as we grow up in our relationship with God.

On this Sunday when we have witnessed the baptism of Kaitlyn, we are aware that she has received both the waters of baptism and the seal of the Holy Spirit. This very day, Kaitlyn, like all of us who have been baptized, has been born of water and the Spirit. She has been claimed by God as God’s precious child. Grace has been poured out into her life. Yet, this initiation into the Christian faith is both an event and a process. It requires an RSVP. It will take a lifetime for her to grow in her relationship with God.

And so it is for each of us. Our Christian faith is a dynamic process of continual growth. Think about this - throughout life we move through various stages of physical development and we mature emotionally, growing in our own self understanding and awareness. We know that growth is essential to life. Physical and mental conditioning are important. We work out. We go to school or earn CEU’s. We seek professional therapy. Why should it be so difficult to understand that growth in faith and love is just as necessary for our well being as growth in mind and body? Rethinking our childhood faith; questioning and discerning what is true; watching for signs of God’s ongoing revelation are critical aspects of our spiritual growth. And throughout the journey, we can count on God providing us with “born again” experiences, where the Spirit forgives, transforms and gives us new beginnings.

Perhaps you can remember a time in your life when you felt God’s grace, God’s unconditional love for you in such a powerful way that it swept away all of your fears, all of your guilt, all of your anger, all the cobwebs and corruption from your soul. Or perhaps you’ve experienced God’s Spirit coming to you in a time of depression or grief or desolation and in this dark night of your soul, God touches your life with hope, and you know that someday there will be happiness and joy once again. If you’ve had moments like these, then you understand that it is not so much something that you can do nor come to by thinking. It is an experience that God provides. Grace happens. And this is the meaning of “eternal” life. Being born again doesn’t simply mean that we will be with God after death. No, eternal life means that we receive the gift of abundant life, here, now, and for eternity. Remember, Jesus said “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.”

Any of you who were here last Sunday night to welcome the Boston Men’s Teen Challenge group heard testimonies of people who had been born from above, born anew, born again and who are experiencing what it means to have eternal life. What powerful witnesses they gave as to the power of Jesus Christ in their lives! On the street, addicted to alcohol and doing drugs at the early ages of 10 and 11 and 12 years old, these young people, by the sheer grace of God, are in a life of recovery and the sharing of the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. Many of them had a “born again” experience but all of them depend on being born anew again and again and again by the Spirit of God as they live out their transformed lives. There is no easy day for

any of them. Their addiction torments them. But through the power of the Spirit, they are able to stay straight, to help others and make a contribution to our drug infested, alcohol addicted society.

Any of you who are in AA know that there has to be an RSVP to God's grace. It is a balance between human effort and God's unconditional love and human effort. If you want to get sober and stay sober you have to acknowledge your addiction and make your own effort to stop drinking. But to make this possible, you have to rely on a Higher Power. Without the grace of God coupled with personal effort there is no getting sober nor being born of the Spirit.

Nicodemus was touched by Jesus. In this first encounter, he leaves Jesus never really understanding what it means to be born from above. Jesus' words about God sending God's son to save the whole world makes little sense to him. But at the end of the gospel of John we meet Nicodemus again. This time it is after the crucifixion and he is with Joseph of Arimathea (John 19: 38 – 42). Jesus is dead, crucified, and there is Nicodemus. This time, he comes not under the cover of night but in the light of Good Friday afternoon. He comes not as an interrogator but as a follower of Jesus. He says nothing. He simply comes, "bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds," for the anointing of Jesus' body and he helps lay Jesus in the tomb. It took time for Jesus' touch to make a difference in his life, but it is clear from this tender deed that Nicodemus has been born from above.

How about you? Do you have your notions of God tightly boxed up? Are you willing to let Jesus touch your life and knock down the walls so that you can move outside the box and wander into the wild and unexplored territory of the Spirit? Remember, such transformation means loving your enemy and turning the other cheek. It means taking up the cross for Jesus and risking everything for the cause of justice. If you have two coats, it means giving one away. It means not simply praying for peace but being a peace-maker. It means being open to the wind, the breath, the gift of the Spirit which will blow across you and through you, sustaining you on your faith journey. May this Lent be just such a blessed time. May each of us be touched by Jesus and know once again the gift of amazing grace.

And now let me ask if there is someone who would like to offer a testimony this morning. Is there someone who can share their witness of how Jesus has touched their lives and made a difference?