

NORTH MAIN SERMON SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

John 3: 1-17

Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” **3** Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.^[a]”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. **6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit. **7** You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^[c] must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”^[d]

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? **11** Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. **12** I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.^[e] **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,^[f] **15** that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”^[g]

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

THE WORD OF GOD

Today's Scripture readings remind us of the enduring faithfulness of God. If only our faith were strong enough to trust God every moment! Through the Scriptures today, we discover that God stays with us even in our doubt. The reading today details Jesus' nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Jewish leader, focusing on the necessity of being "born again" of water and the Spirit to enter God's kingdom. Maybe Nicodemus comes at night because he is afraid of what others would think – especially the religious establishment. The narrator in this Gospel portrays Nicodemus as a learned man with impressive credentials, describing him not only as a Pharisee but as “a ruler of the Jews.” Jesus refers to him as “the teacher of Israel. Nicodemus thinks that he, as a religious leader, understands who Jesus is and who God is. Jesus calls his understanding into question. Like a typical scholar, Nicodemus begins the conversation with a statement based on evidence. “We know” that Jesus is a teacher come from God.

It is surprising to us that Nicodemus could be confused or be concerned about what others think. He's a religious leader and should understand spiritual lessons but somehow he feels he has missed some crucial truth. And, there is a reason he is going to Jesus. He has an inkling that Jesus might be able to provide that missing important detail. Nicodemus has somehow been headed in the wrong direction and now he must change his course. This he knows but Nicodemus seems hesitant. He seems uncertain about making such a drastic change. We have to wonder why?

What makes this remarkable man slow to take Jesus at his word? What is confusing him? These are the things we know.

1. First, Nicodemus was a religious man.
2. Secondly, Nicodemus was a powerful person.
3. Third, Nicodemus was a man of pedigree.
4. Fourth, Nicodemus was an educated man.

In the reading today, we see Jesus telling Nicodemus that we speak of what we know and yet some still do not believe. Today and most days we look for Security and Comfort and that seems to be somewhere in the midst of what we know. Somehow we seem to have moved away from calling the space where we hold gathered worship a sanctuary. We call it other names but, sometimes there is no better word to describe what we need than sanctuary. “For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble,” writes the psalmist in the Psalm 27. And when aren’t we in a day of trouble? There is something appealing about providing space to withdraw from the world for a time—a place to breathe, a place to be in silence just for a while. A place to worship. A place to just be still. Worship time can be an opportunity to ask how we can provide sanctuary for others in our world as well as for us. It is a chance to practice compassion rather than division; acceptance rather than judgment. This is why we take a few minutes at the beginning of our service to just be quiet and prepare our hearts for the service time within this Sanctuary. And sometimes, on a really quiet day, we can feel the presence of God here in this place. The conversation dies down, and everyone just sits back and enjoys the quiet. It’s almost like a breeze. The gift of the breeze. We don’t know where it comes from. We didn’t know where it was going. But we knew it was here, because we can feel the presence of God. This may be the same presence that Nicodemus feels, the one many of us have felt — is not the reach of human faith toward God. It is the movement of God toward us. Jesus needed quiet

time and so do we. Our Offering hymn and our Scripture reading today both say that God so loved the World..that he gave his only Son. Jesus reminds his followers that there is direction and purpose to his ministry, even when things are dark. We could all learn a lesson from this reading today to stay the course when we are confronted by fear. God allows fear and testing to come our way. He wants us to learn how to not respond to the pressure, and learn how to go through the difficulty without being crushed emotionally. Some of us may just say right now...I have such fear about this journey. I am not like Jesus, when someone threatens me, I run away. When someone questions me, I do not have the answers. There is so much going on in my life right now! I don't think I can take on a Lenten journey let alone all the other things in my life. There are people whose faith is so much stronger than mine is. How can I serve the Lord? I don't know what to do. I don't have the fancy words that would bring comfort to the hearts of people who are troubled. I can't even solve my own problems. Psalm 121, reminds us that this journey of faith is sustained by divine care. The psalmist looks to the hills and finds assurance that the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, never slumbers or abandons. Love does not merely call us; it keeps and protects us along the way. The lord is our light and our salvation. Take that simple statement and sit quietly in the Sanctuary and patiently wait for the light of God to help you find peace. God's love transforms not just hearts but destinies, inviting all people into new life. God's love is not static sentiment but living power that calls and ultimately transforms all who receive it.

During the Easter Preparation season, think about what you believe makes life meaningful. Consider how much space worldly success takes up in that mental list and how living a life of transformation looks in terms of body, mind, and spirit. Last week we talked about temptation. 40 days where Satan seeks to make Jesus use his spiritual gifts for himself alone. To feed

himself, protect himself and to take things for himself. Much like what the Pharisees had started to do, using their spiritual monopoly for their own gain, but Jesus has no intention of doing that. His heart is in the right place. He rejects Satan and the temptations offered him. We need to be a little bit more like Jesus and “ask what we can do to serve God better”. What temptations can we reject. We need to add one more small thing to our life of service for our church. What can one person do.. not much but together we can do a lot..just think of what that one person named Jesus did for the world. Jesus is aware of his path to Jerusalem and his eventual death, yet he continues his ministry in spite of it and takes control of his eventual destiny. For us as we continue through the Lenten season and the journey to Easter morning it is about placing your heart into the correct place. Ordering your spiritual life around what is truly important despite any obstacles. May we learn today from Jesus’ example on the road to Jerusalem: from his determination and strength to follow God’s will; his compassion and pity for the lost; his unswerving commitment to justice and righteousness; and most of all the hope he holds out for all who will continue in discipleship with him. Today we celebrate a gift that Jesus gave us at the end of his journey, but today it is the beginning of ours.