

Southport Presbyterian Church
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Questions in the Dark
John 3:1-18

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

³In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

⁴“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!”

⁵Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The 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.”

⁹“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

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

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. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”

Here we are in the gospel of John again. Last week was chapter 2, the wedding and the wine, and this is chapter 3, where Jesus has an after-dark visitor. Who was John, the gospel writer? John was a friend and follower of Jesus. He knew Jesus as well as anyone did, traveled with him for some years, and spent the rest of his life as a follower. Unlike many of the other disciples, John lived a long life. He wrote five books in the New Testament: the Gospel of John, First, Second and Third John, and Revelation, the last book of the Bible. He lived a long life.

What is the main point John wanted to make?

John wants us to see Jesus. He wrote to establish the identity of Jesus. You've heard the opinions about Jesus – that he was a good man, a great moral teacher, a spiritual leader. John is

determined to say more than that, to establish the identity of Jesus, to make it clear that Jesus is more than a good man or a great teacher or a spiritual guide. Rather he was and is God Himself. He is divine, God's One and Only Son, the Savior of the world. So chapter one begins: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

Who is Nicodemus?

By night a man named Nicodemus comes to talk to Jesus. Nicodemus is an educated man and a member of the ruling council. He has standing, influence, and he is a smart man who can debate and who thinks like a good, smart lawyer.

Why did Nicodemus come at night?

So why does he come at night, in the dark? While scripture doesn't clearly tell us the answer, we do know that many people were finding Jesus troubling and troublesome, difficult and dangerous, someone threatening enough to watch and maybe to be stopped. So Nicodemus chooses a conversation in the dark. Perhaps he wants no witnesses. Perhaps he wants a private conversation.

Why did Nicodemus want to talk to Jesus?

Nicodemus begins with compliments. "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." It's tempting to respond to compliments, but Jesus goes right past them. It's normal to return compliments. "Thank you for the kind words, Nicodemus, and I've heard of you, too." But what Jesus says next, doesn't follow the usual conversational pattern. Just a few verses earlier, John writes that Jesus "knew what was in a man." He knows what's in Nicodemus. Better than Nicodemus does. So, on the surface Nicodemus presents himself as a fair, open-minded inquirer, trained in debate, in search of information. The conversation Nicodemus seeks should follow a predictable pattern: introductions and mutual compliments, then some parrying of ideas, some questions worthy of debate. But Jesus doesn't agree to that conversation. Instead, he replies to the deep matter, the real issue, the true question he can read in Nicodemus. He says: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Jesus names the real reason Nicodemus has come: Nicodemus wants to know how to belong to God, to be part of the kingdom of God. So if he wants to know the Lord, wants to do what's right, wants to be right, wants to understand, if he is a religious ruler, an educated man, what is missing? What is it he needs? What is he looking for? What is it Jesus sees in this man and addresses?

Centuries before, King David had a flash of revelation into God and himself and he cried out, "**I have sinned against the Lord**" to which the reply came: "**The Lord has put away your sin.**" (2 Samuel 12:13) The disciple Peter had a flash of revelation into God and himself, and he fell down and said, "**Leave me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.**" (Luke 5:8) A woman wept as she stood by Jesus, as she washed his feet with her tears of repentance. She heard the Lord's word, "**Your sins are forgiven... your faith has saved you, go in peace.**" (Luke 7:48, 50) The repentant tax collector said in genuine sorrow, "**God, be merciful to me a sinner**" and the Bible says he went home justified. (Luke 18:13) That's the need. Those who have despaired of their own efforts at justifying themselves, who have been given the insight to see their own great need of divine help, their own need of a Savior, have come to the Lord for mercy and have

received it. As it says in Titus: “Not by works of anything righteous we’ve done, but by his mercy he saved us.”

What does Nicodemus hear from Jesus?

Jesus tells him that he must be born again, born from above, that he needs not a fresh start, or second chance, or more information, or a spiritual technique, or more rules to perfectly follow, but a new heart. As the Lord says in Ezekiel: “I will take your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” You must be born again.

True to his training, when Nicodemus hears Jesus puzzling remarks, he begins an academic conversation; he begins defining terms. “How can this be?” he asks. “Can a man return to his mother’s womb and really be born again?”

And Jesus explains again. Nicodemus must be born of the spirit and it is the work of the Spirit of God when this happens. Notice the wind, says Jesus. You can’t explain it, you can’t see it, you can’t say where it came from or where it is going, yet it’s certainly there. You can feel it brush by and sometimes you can witness its power. You can see where it’s been and what it has left behind it. You can’t control it. Just so, the Spirit of God is calling people, speaking to them, letting them see that they need a Savior, inviting them to meet the Savior and thus to be born again.

And Jesus says more. That there is light and dark out there, right and wrong, good and evil, and that we by nature love darkness rather than light. We have sinful hearts and need the Savior. We need new hearts.

I wonder how this sounded to someone as logical and legally educated as Nicodemus. Someone who is used to learning rules and codes, comparing and weighing them, writing them down and discussing them. Does he, Nicodemus, need to be born again? Does he need to say, “I am a sinner”? Does he need a Savior?

What happened to Nicodemus?

How did Nicodemus respond? Chapter 3 doesn’t tell us. But, we see him again in chapter 7. Jesus has been teaching, in the Temple. The ruling council, to which Nicodemus belongs, questions the Temple guards, “Why didn’t you bring that man Jesus in?” The guards reply, “No one ever taught like he does.” One of the rulers says: “Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No!” Apparently if Nicodemus has believed that Jesus is more than just a teacher, he’s kept it to himself. And then he speaks up. Nicodemus asks a question. “Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him out?” It seems Nicodemus still has an open mind on the question of Jesus, still isn’t decided. But the Bible tells us that on that day, the crowd did begin to decide. In chapter 7 it says: “So there was a division in the crowd because of him [Jesus].” Jesus became a dividing line. Some believed; some didn’t. What about Nicodemus? On which side did he stand?

We hear of him one more time, at the end of the story, at the end of the gospel, at the end of Jesus’ life. It’s **chapter 19**, just after the long day of crucifixion. **“Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus**

brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen."

So did Nicodemus believe? Did he cry out, like David and Peter and the woman who cried at the feet of Jesus? Did he say to the Lord, "I am a sinful man?" Did he hear Jesus' say, "Your sins are forgiven?" Did that ever happen? We don't know. Church tradition says that Nicodemus did become a follower of Jesus and that he became a leader in the Church but we don't know that for certain.

Why did John write the book of John? What was the point he was making? First, it was about Jesus and his identity. Second, it is about you and everyone who reads this gospel. It's a call to faith, a call to be born from above, a call not to self-improvement or following rules, or an intellectual acknowledgment of anything, but a cry for the divine power that will make you into a new person. It's a personal call to faith. It was so for the disciples who we talked about last week, who were at the wedding with Jesus, who thought they already knew Jesus, but who suddenly saw him in a new way, a new light. And they saw themselves too. And what did the end of John chapter 2 say? "They put their faith in him."

John wrote this gospel that we might know who Jesus is. He is giving us a clear witness to what he has seen with his own eyes, heard with his own ears, and knows by his own experience. In chapter 1 he writes: **"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God."** (John 1:12) And at the end of his gospel in chapter 20 he writes: **"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."** (John 20:30-31)

John makes it clear that faith is your own business, your own response to the moment when you know you need the Lord, when God opens your eyes, your heart, your understanding. Nothing I can say makes that happen. That is God's divine work in you. But when it comes, let your heart cry out. Let yourself need the Lord, admit you need a Savior, and let yourself lean back on God. It's the beginning of a transformed life. When you put your faith in Jesus – perhaps at first no one will notice, and you won't notice, but over time God will work in your life, you will be called to renew and deepen that commitment and your life will change until you become someone different than you were... you become more and more the person God created you to be, more courageous, more honest, more compassionate, and you will have ministry to do.

Just this week here is how I've seen this in some of you. On Monday, I received an email from a dad in the congregation, who wanted to comment on the scripture from last Sunday, because he'll be using it soon. He has a Bible study with the football team of a large high school here in the city. Who knew he did that? That was Monday.

On Tuesday I met with a man from our church who recently retired, again. He has retired many times from many jobs. When he recently found himself without an occupation he prayed, "Lord, do you have something else for me?" He said that the Lord didn't answer right away. But when he was visiting a friend at a rehabilitation center, he learned they needed someone to do a Bible study for the residents. He knew right then, he said, that the Lord had this for him. So he has been doing a Bible study and what he has learned is that the residents long to hear about heaven, they want to know they need not be afraid of dying. And, he said, he loves teaching about heaven because that is his next home. He also is one of our communion carriers, one of those who, every communion Sunday, carries communion after church to people who can't be here with us. The

director of the facility where he does his Bible study asked if he could bring communion for the Bible study group. He was in my office to ask if it would be all right if he took communion for 15 people. Yes, it is. And this gentleman said to me, "I feel so honored that the Lord would choose me." Last month, he had a birthday and he is 91. That was Tuesday.

On Wednesday, I had a lunch meeting and listened as my husband's sister described how she and her husband had decided to be career missionaries in Africa with Wycliffe Bible Translators. First, they chose to do short term service for two years in Africa. They were newlyweds. They went to a country so poor that on a good day there were three hours of electricity and some days none. Their greatest fears about living in Africa? Patrick didn't want a serious illness; Sue didn't want difficulty with pregnancy. In their first year Patrick had both malaria and hepatitis. He was sick for three months with no air conditioning, no fans, and outside temperatures over 100 degrees. In their second year, Sue had an ectopic pregnancy which requires immediate surgery and is life-threatening. They traveled all day in a truck over bumpy roads to another country where there was a surgeon. He told them that Sue had had many small medical miracles that kept her alive, and that she would recover well.

Now here's how the story should go for a young couple trying out life in Africa: "We tried it for two years, and it went so smoothly that we decided to make missions a career." Instead the story goes like this: "We tried it for two years, our worst fears came true, and God brought us through. We learned we could trust Him with our lives, so we gave Him our futures." They spent the next 20 years in Africa. That was Wednesday.

On Thursday, at another lunch, I listened as one of our members who cares for very sick people on a surgical floor, said that she has grown bolder in talking about the Lord. When the opening is there and it's appropriate, she speaks of Jesus. She asks if her patients would like prayer, and tells them that the Lord is with them. Her hospital floor, she said, is her mission field; it's where the Lord has put her to serve and to share.

Our lesson today ends with Jesus saying to the intelligent, successful, and educated man Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John wants you to get just one thing: See Jesus. See that he is God's only Son, God's only Way. See that he has come, for you. See that you can believe this and that God will make you new.

Did Nicodemus finally believe?

Do you believe?