

## Night Meeting

John 3:1-17

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Rev. Don Best

Bethel Presbyterian Church

West Union, IA

March 8, 2020

### Gospel Reading

This morning, and for the rest of the Sundays in Lent, we switch from reading the Gospel of Matthew, to the Gospel of John. Not to worry, we will get back to Matthew in time for the Triumphal Entry of Jesus, on Palm Sunday.

This morning, in John, chapter 4, verses 1 through 17, we hear the story of a man named, Nicodemus. We are told that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, and a teacher of Israel. Nicodemus is an important person in his community. You might say that he has a lot to lose, and in reality, takes more than a small risk in coming to Jesus, so the narrator tells us that he comes to Jesus "by night." Listen now to our reading from John, chapter 4:

<sup>3:1</sup> 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?

<sup>11</sup> "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. <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.

<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.

<sup>17</sup> "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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### Sermon

Have you ever started a conversation with someone, and before long it becomes clear that you are having two different conversations? At some point, one of you realizes the problem, then stops and says, "wait, what are *you* talking about?"

That is what is going on between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus begins the conversation when he approaches Jesus saying: "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."

Then Jesus says, and this is my own translation from the Greek: "Truly, truly I say to you, if someone is not born *anōthen*, they will not be able to see the Kingdom of God."

Now, there was word in there you probably did not recognize: *anōthen*. The Greek word *anōthen* means, from above, again, or anew. This Greek word is the cause for the confusion that flows through the rest of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus gets stuck in the idea of being born again, while Jesus tries to explain why he says a person must be born from above.

There is no word in English with the same double meaning, so it is difficult for us to appreciate the confusion of Nicodemus. In our English translation, it just sounds to us like Nicodemus is easily confused and can't let go of his misconception about what Jesus is saying.

After Nicodemus expresses his concern over how a person can be born a second time, Jesus tries to make his point clearer, talking about water and spirit, then wind and spirit, and finally about being born of the Spirit. But, in the end, Nicodemus goes away frustrated and confused, saying: "How can these things be?"

After Nicodemus fades back into the night, Jesus continues to explain what he means. Eventually, Jesus says something about earthly things verses heavenly things. We know that Nicodemus was stuck in the notion of earthly birth, so when Jesus said we must be "born from above," it makes sense that he meant some kind of heavenly birth. But what exactly can that mean?

Jesus said: "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." Jesus, the Son of Man, is the one who descended from heaven. The next thing Jesus said was, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole as a way for the Israelites to save themselves from the deadly bite of the snakes, the serpent was the means to salvation for the people of Israel.

On this second Sunday in Lent, we should hear "the Son of Man will be lifted up," a reference to Jesus being lifted up onto the cross of Good Friday. As the serpent Moses lifted up was Israel's salvation, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross of Rome is the salvation for the world.

And finally, the very familiar verses: "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. 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."

To have eternal life is to have life no longer defined by blood or the will of the flesh, but life lived by the will of God. "Eternal" does mean mere endless duration of human existence, but life lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God. With this Johannian understanding of eternal life, we must shift our expectation from the future promise of life eternal, to eternal life in the present; eternal life lived now in the family of God.

When Jesus says that the Son of Man will be lifted up, it shifts the entire focus to the crucifixion and provides the key to understanding being born *anowhen*. Being born from above, or born anew, means being born in the new life that one receives as a child of God, the life received through believing in him. The life received through the Holy Spirit of God. Life lived as the newly born follower of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was lifted up on the cross, and was raised again on Easter Morning. This rebirth has only one source – Jesus and his offer of his own life on the cross.

In the end, it is the cross that makes sense of the double meaning of *anóthen*: to be born from above is to be born again through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross.

Let us pray:

God of grace, as we can get lost in our own misunderstanding, and walk away frustrated and confused, help us to get past our groans of, "how can these things be?" Through your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to the amazing grace of the cross. As you save us through the cross of Good Friday, and give a new birth through the gift of your Son, make us instruments of your saving grace in the world; spreading the gospel in these troubled times.

AMEN.