

Scripture for Sunday March 8th 2020

Num 21:4-9 (NIV)

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" 6 Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

8 The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

John 3:1-17 (NIV)

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." 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 gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You 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."

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. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

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.

Sermon: A Confusing Conversation with Nicodemus

“Are you ‘born again?’” When you hear that phrase, what feelings does it evoke in you? For many, it’s *not* a positive reaction. And it doesn’t sound very ‘Presbyterian.’ Speaking of which, there is a story of a visiting evangelist dining with a minister at a restaurant in a Scottish town. The evangelist noticed that their waitress was wearing a cross on her necklace and, trying to strike up a religious conversation, asked if that meant she was a Christian. She replied, “Och, noo, I’m *Presbyterian*!” Like many, she felt that she was *born* Presbyterian and that’s all there is to it. The same could, of course, be said of Anglicans and Catholics, and others who practice infant baptism. Being “Presbyterian” becomes part of a person’s identity, essentially from birth, without understanding what that really means. Like for Nicodemus, whose identity was wrapped up in his Jewishness, the concept of somehow *being* spiritually alive or “born again” simply doesn’t make sense. Yet Jesus said that regardless of one’s religious pedigree, we must be “born again.”¹ What *is* he on about? Let’s see.

Over the next few weeks in Lent, the Lectionary readings present various conversations with Jesus from John’s Gospel, the first being with Nicodemus who, we are told, came “by night.”² He was a devout religious leader who was also a member of the highest legislative body amongst the Jews.³ John begins his account by emphasizing that Nicodemus fails to recognize *who* Jesus really is – just like many of the Jewish leaders of the day, and many people today for that matter. Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is “a *teacher* who has come from God because no one could perform the miraculous signs that he did unless God was with him.”⁴ He therefore recognizes Jesus as a *prophet* - a messenger authorized by God. Given who Nicodemus was, that’s a remarkable admission. But John’s has already explained earlier in his Gospel that Jesus is *more* than just a prophet; he is the Messiah.⁵ And not just that, John claims Jesus is more intimately connected with God than any other human being.⁶

Jesus replies to Nicodemus with the confusing riddle: “I tell you the solemn truth; unless a person is born *from above* he cannot see the kingdom of God.”⁷ This is shocking! Nicodemus, like all Jews, regarded themselves as God’s chosen people simply by the fact they were born of a Jewish mother. “Are you saying that my Jewish parentage is *no* guarantee to admission into the kingdom of God?” asks Nicodemus. “That’s right; no, it isn’t,” says Jesus, “The identity or status of one’s parents makes no

¹ John 3:3,7.

² John 3:2. The assumption is that he didn’t want to be publicly associated with Jesus, though he was an admirer of him. However, “dark,” in contrast to “light,” indicates separation from God and is thematic in John; see John 3:19-21.

³ He was a (wealthy) Pharisee *and* a member of the elite Sanhedrin; see also: John 7:45-52; 19:39-42.

⁴ John 3:2. See also John 2:23. (John presents this conversation with Nicodemus as if it were in Jerusalem or its environs.) Note: The “we know” in John 3:2 is obviously plural; does that mean other members of the Sanhedrin think the same way?

⁵ John 1:29-34,36,41,49. See also <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Who-is-Jesus-Come-and-See.pdf> .

⁶ John 1:1-5, 14-18. The doctrine of the Trinity emerged in the 3-4th century AD formalised the unique identity of Jesus.

⁷ John 3:3 (NRSV, NET) Born “from *above*” (rather than “again”- NIV) is a good translation as Nicodemus admits “Jesus is *from* God.” See also John 1:12-13. Curiously, from “above” also points to *place*, whereas, “again” point to a *time*.

difference as far as a person's relationship with God is concerned. There are two kinds of births," Jesus goes on to say, "When a woman's waters break, it's a sign the baby is on its way - that's normal *physical* birth. However, it takes the divine Spirit to give birth to spirit and that's *God's initiative*."⁸ Jesus then adds to this religious expert, "Don't look so shocked when I say, 'You must all be born from above.'"⁹

That phrase "You must be born from above," is also commonly translated as being "born anew" or "born again" – as we heard this morning. The way John tells it, Nicodemus assumes only the *physical* meaning, focusing on being "born again," and recognizes the impossibility of re-entering the womb for that to happen. John, writing in Greek, uses a word [*anōthen*] that has a *double meaning*: you must be born "from above" *and* you must be "born anew." Bible translators recognize the problem: there isn't a similar word in English with such a double meaning, and – curiously - neither was there a corresponding word in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke! John's wordplay provides dramatic irony and perhaps this gives the impression that Nicodemus, despite being a spiritual leader, is focused on earthly, rather than heavenly, matters.¹⁰ However, since there *is* more than one meaning to the word John uses, and *both* are *necessary* to make sense of this confusing conversation, so there is *more* to life than mere *physical* reality; there is a *spiritual* dimension that needs to be awakened. And speaking as he is to a religious scholar, Jesus says that entry into God's kingdom does *not* arise by intellectual *illumination*, but through *regeneration* by the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus is still confused by this reply¹¹ and Jesus says, perhaps with some irony, "You are one of the nation's experts and you *don't* know these things!"¹² What was it that Jesus expected Nicodemus to know? The answer is the Old Testament Scriptures. For example, Nicodemus would have known all about the God's promises in various prophecies, such as this one from Ezekiel 36: "I will give you a *new heart* and put a *new spirit* in you."¹³ This occurs just before Ezekiel's famous vision of the dry bones coming to life.¹⁴ Those bones represented the hope-less nation of Israel, yet through that vision God proclaimed that he himself would bring them back to life, saying: "I will put my Spirit in you and you *will* live."¹⁵ Nicodemus fails to recognise what God is doing before his very eyes in and through the person of Jesus.

Jesus then gives a little proverbial commentary on the implications of being "born of the Spirit,"¹⁶ again employing wordplay using the word *pneuma*, the Greek word for both "spirit" *and* "wind" [and, yes,

⁸ John 3:6. Note "flesh" does not have negative connotations in John; it sometimes does in Paul's letters. Note too that the mention of "waters" here does *not* mean "baptism"! (Consider also Eccl 11:5 - "Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.")

⁹ John 3:7. Note the "You all" – the use of plural; this seems *not* to be a private conversation; it's a teaching moment.

¹⁰ See John 3:11-12.

¹¹ John 3:9.

¹² John 3:10-12.

¹³ Ezek 36:26-27; see also Heb 8:10; Jer 31:33.

¹⁴ Ezek 37:1-14.

¹⁵ Ezek 37:14.

¹⁶ John 3:6,8.

the root of our word, 'pneumatic']. "The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same way with everyone who is born of the Spirit."¹⁷ The wind is invisible, yet we know it's real because we can witness its effects in the rustling of leaves on a tree. In the same way, God's unpredictable and mysterious Spirit gives rise to creative acts, including new life.

Returning to the Presbyterian waitress for a moment. As part of Christian baptism, we are "born of the Spirit."¹⁸ This birth "from above" is a gracious act of God. St. Paul refers to this as becoming a "new creation."¹⁹ The trouble is that many, if not most, Christians don't nurture or live out this dynamic life of the Spirit. We see baptism as merely a *physical* act and not a *spiritual* one.²⁰ For some, there is a later "aha" moment when they realise that omission and this is accompanied by a new spiritual "awakening" and God becomes profoundly real. If that describes what has happened to you in the last year or so, and you would like to celebrate that new realisation by participating in an act of Affirmation of Faith during our morning service, then please speak to me afterwards. Naturally, God wants us *all* to have such moments, but the Spirit will not force his presence upon us.²¹ Of course, these days the majority of people are *not* baptised. But since being born from above is a gracious act of God, the new life of the Spirit is freely available to them too - as John goes on to explain.

There is another even more confusing element to this conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus then says, somewhat cryptically, "No one has *ascended* into heaven except the One who *descended* from heaven – the Son of Man."²² Nicodemus, being an Jewish expert, would know that Jesus was referring to a popular prophecy in Daniel 7.²³ In addition, John's *readers*, from the last verse of John 1, will also know that Jesus is obliquely referring to himself.²⁴ The implication being that Jesus himself is the divinely-authorized *revealer* of "heavenly things"²⁵ because he is the intermediary bridge between God and the world.²⁶ This mention of ascension prompts another Jewish image of an act of *raising*. As we heard in our Old Testament reading, during the wandering in the wilderness, Moses *lifted up* a bronze serpent on a stick so that anyone who looked at God's provision for healing would be made whole.²⁷ Jesus continues, "In the same way the Son of Man will be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have

¹⁷ John 3:8.

¹⁸ We are baptized in the *Trinitarian* formula: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. See also Acts 2.

¹⁹ 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15.

²⁰ Putting it differently, it is not just about the *fact* of our baptism, but of *living out* what that baptism means. Or, in the language, of the gospels (& Acts 2), living out the "kingdom of God" – as we have been hearing about recently in the Sermon on the Mount. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Life-In-God%E2%80%99s-New-Community.pdf>.

²¹ See Matt 5:6 and [20].

²² John 3:13.

²³ See Dan 7:13-14.

²⁴ See John 1:51.

²⁵ See John 3:12.

²⁶ See also John 6:33,41,42,51,58, 61-62.

²⁷ John 3:14; See Num 21:5-8; 2 Kings 18:4; Wisdom of Solomon 16:7.

eternal life.”²⁸ First, there is no mention of the “Son of Man” being “lifted up” in Daniel 7, but there *is* such language in the suffering servant prophecies of Isaiah.²⁹ If we find all these allusions to Old Testament texts confusing, remember Jesus is joining the dots for the benefit of Nicodemus – and John’s readers – who would have known all about these prophecies, and I encourage you to check them out. Second, there is now a clear hint of *how* Jesus will die *and* the outcome of his death, namely, *life* for all who believe in him.³⁰ This aspect is reiterated in one of the most well-known verses in the New Testament: “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.”³¹ It is here that we read of the lavish, limitless, love of God that embraces the whole cosmos, the whole of humankind – not just Jews. God gave his unique, “one-of-a-kind” Son so that *whoever* believes in God’s chosen Messiah will be born of the Spirit - and so will enjoy the fullness of life. The life the Spirit³² gives us the intimate, unending presence of God - *not* everlasting human existence. It’s a *gift* to all who believe; it’s *not* a work of human effort or wisdom, and *everyone* is invited. Moreover, life in God’s kingdom begins *now*, not in the future after we die. Being “born again” is therefore nothing to be embarrassed about! Indeed, it’s the *best* gift, even for Presbyterians!

In conclusion, Nicodemus was an intelligent and devout Jew. He knew Jesus was special but Nicodemus misunderstood who Jesus was because he was trying to understand *heavenly* things in an *earthly* way. Many today, like Nicodemus, respect Jesus as a “good teacher” but that is – in John’s view - a wholly inadequate view of Jesus. Instead, Jesus is, as I said earlier, more intimately connected with God than any other human being; he’s God’s Son. Because of that, he is the legitimate *revealer* of heavenly things. He is the *key* that unlocks the Old Testament Scriptures. He is God’s gift given *to* the world *from* a God who passionately *loves* the world. Our birth from above - though the divine Spirit - therefore enables *us* see *earthly things* in a *heavenly way*.

Are you still confused? [Maybe.] Are you curious to know more? [I hope so.] Every Sunday we pray for the Spirit to illuminate the Scriptures to us and some may indeed have an “aha” moment of insight. That may not be a blinding road to Damascus experience,³³ but it is evidence that the Spirit is gently nudging us to discover more. And you are always welcome to talk further with me! Let us pray.

²⁸ John 3:14b-15. In John 1:4 there is mention of “life” without the adjective “eternal.”

²⁹ Isa 52:13-53:12. (There is no mention of “Son of Man” here, rather “my servant.” This important text is seen as messianic.)

³⁰ The “lifting up” connects with “ascend.” In John there is a three-fold “glorification” of the Son of Man. Christ’s ascension is a *continual process* that begins with Jesus being physically *lifted up* on the cross at his crucifixion, to Christ being *raised* from the dead in the resurrection, and finally, being *exulted* back to God in heaven.

³¹ John 3:16-17. See also John 1:12-13; 10:10 (Note the word “perish” can also be translated “lost.”) The twinning of “perish” and “life” is important; there *are* consequences to rejecting God’s generous gift – John 3:19-20. That is *not* the main aspect of this story and so I will not address divine “judgement” in this sermon. (Jews saw “judgement” as a *positive* thing, as it meant that all that was ‘wrong’ in the world was going to be finally put right; evil would be vanquished forever by God.)

³² Paul, in Galatians 5:25, encourages to keep “in step” with the Spirit.

³³ See Acts 9:1-22 – the conversion of Paul.