

Sermon 3-1-26
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Based on the Gospel Lesson for The Second Sunday in Lent, John 3:1-18

Two Rabbis

In the night Nicodemus came to Jesus. Nicodemus was drawn. He was in awe. He was intrigued. He wanted a closer look at Jesus. He wanted a dialogue. But how exactly do you start a dialogue with a holy man?

Nicodemus did the best he could. John 3:2, "... 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.'" This is a statement of great honor from one rabbi to another. It's also a statement of submission. Rabbi, you are greater than I. I can't do the miracles you are doing. What you are doing is plainly from God. And I honor you as someone whom God has elevated to a most special position. In most human interactions, this would be the beginning of a special relationship in which Jesus would be obligated to return courtesies as one rabbi to another.

Nicodemus didn't know it, but by declaring Jesus a rabbi come from God, Nicodemus had raised a fundamental question of Jesus' earthly ministry. If Jesus is from God, just who is He? Was He just a rabbi?

Therefore, Jesus ignored the proffered honors, skipped the normal return courtesies of meeting and jumped directly to the central question Nicodemus had raised. Who is He? We read in John 3:3, "Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" Just a note here. "Born again" can also be translated "born from above."

As we'll see in a minute. Nicodemus had no idea what Jesus was talking about because he didn't know he had raised a most fundamental question. But we know the question. We know who Jesus is and we have time to ponder Jesus' words.

Central to Jesus' reply is the Kingdom of God. Now, as Americans, we've got a problem understanding this. We don't have a king or a hereditary monarchy. We live in a republic that is supposed to be a government of the people, by the people and for the people. But in the Kingdom of God, it's a government by the King. Period. You're either with the King or you're not. Since the King is your Creator, you're either with your Creator or not. You're either the King's loyal subject, or you're a rebel. And while it's clear from Scripture that Yahweh shares His authority with His subjects, the Kingdom of God is not a democracy. We don't get to vote on anything. Only the righteousness of the King can prevail. Amen.

So, here's a definition of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is a created universe in which all the creatures have a total loyalty to their Creator because their Creator has made them as righteous as He. The loyalty must be a loyalty of love that demonstrates a continuous commitment of the creatures to their Creator. This is because the Creator has a total loyalty of love and commitment to His creatures. And in the Kingdom of God, the creatures have a total loyalty of love and commitment to each other. Thus, the Kingdom is not a mere government. It is family. As Yahweh said in Revelation 21:7, "... 'The one who

conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.” That’s family — the family of God.

We also read in Revelation 19:7, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready.” The Lamb is Messiah. The bride is His Church. This is greater even than family. For, a marriage union is the epitome of intimacy. Thus, there is true royal family and righteous intimacy in the Kingdom of God.

Now, a kingdom has a king. The King of the Kingdom of God is obviously Yahweh. But, as Psalm 110 tells us, Yahweh has a real human being at His right hand as a regent. The prophet Daniel saw this regent in a vision, as we read in Daniel 7:13-14, “13 In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (NIV)

At the end of His ministry, during His trial before the Sanhedrin, Jesus of Nazareth made the claim that He is the Son of Man that Daniel saw in the vision. Jesus’ claim drove the Sanhedrin so nuts that they condemned Jesus to death. But, Jesus proved Himself to be the Son of Man in Daniel through His victorious resurrection from the dead. And so Jesus is the God/human King of Creation for all who believe. This is who Jesus is.

Therefore, when Jesus answered Nicodemus with the statement that no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again, He was also proclaiming that if someone can’t see the Kingdom of God, they also won’t be able to recognize that He is its King. And to this day it remains impossible to see who Jesus really is without this born again experience.

Now, when Jesus used the term “born again” He was really speaking in a parable. He was comparing the earthly experience of birth with a spiritual experience. From Nicodemus’ response, it’s clear that he didn’t realize Jesus was speaking in a parable. Thus, we read in John 3:4, “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’” Poor Nicodemus. He just didn’t get it.

Therefore, Jesus clarified His parable this way in John 3:5-6, “5 Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’” We know that human beings give birth to human beings. But we humans are much more than our physical bodies. Jesus made this clear by saying that we are spirit. And Lord Holy Spirit needs to give our spirits a new birth in order for us to see and enter the kingdom of God. Without this spiritual rebirth we remain totally blind and ignorant of our Creator and His righteous will and purpose for us. We remain blind and lost in the grip of Original Sin.

For we’re born into this world spiritual pagans in total rebellion against our Creator. As the late radio preacher J. Vernon McGee used to say, “when you hold a newborn baby in your arms, you’re really holding five pounds of sin.” Therefore, left to ourselves, we’ll find some way to deny our Creator. We’ll find some way to live without Him. We can be very content wickedly denying Yahweh’s existence and being our own gods. We can be most protective of the power to decide good and evil for ourselves.

Consequently, without the new birth that Jesus proclaimed, we are all ultimately headed for the destiny created by God not for human beings, but for rebellious angels. It’s

called the Lake of Fire or hell. All humans who follow rebellious angels in this life will follow them into eternal hell. Only humans who follow the completely obedient Messiah of God will gain entry through Him into the kingdom of God. So, without spiritual rebirth, no human can see Jesus as the Messiah. And without the righteous Suffering Messiah, no human being can gain entry into the kingdom of God, no matter how righteous they may think themselves to be.

Jesus continued in John 3:7-10, “7 ‘Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.” 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. 9 Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ 10 Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’”

Of course Nicodemus couldn’t understand. At least, not yet. Jesus meant that as a rabbi, Nicodemus should have understood the Messianic prophesy Yahweh had made to Israel in Ezekiel 36:25-27, “25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

Notice that Yahweh prophesied that He would use water and the Spirit to effect a change of heart in His people. Indeed, this passage is probably the source of Jesus’ words when said to Nicodemus, “No one can enter the kingdom unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”

Water is baptism into the forgiveness of sins won by Jesus’ sacrificial atonement for us on the cross. Water is baptism into Jesus.

“My Spirit” is none other than Lord Holy Spirit, one of the three persons of the One true Trinitarian God. Indeed, Jesus was again referring to this prophesy from Ezekiel that God will put His Holy Spirit in us when He told the disciples in John 14:15-17, “15 ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” It’s plain by his question, “How can this be?”, that Nicodemus did not understand the prophecy in Ezekiel 36. He could not comprehend that Lord Holy Spirit effects a new birth, a spiritual renewal in those He brings to Jesus the Messiah.

No one, including Nicodemus, had any clue about the fulfillment of Ezekiel 36. And in this incident at the beginning of Jesus ministry, the outpouring of Lord Holy Spirit was still three years away. Therefore, Jesus continued with Nicodemus in a different direction. John 3:11-15, “11 ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

First, Jesus rebuked Nicodemus for not understanding the parable about rebirth. He had used something familiar from our experience on earth — birth, a new beginning — but Nicodemus could not understand its spiritual application. Next Jesus rebuked Nicodemus for not understanding who He is — the promised Messiah, come from heaven. Finally, Jesus

taught Nicodemus something else that he would not be able to understand until later — the two modes of Messiah, the suffering and victorious Messiah.

To do this, Jesus turned from using a parable to plainer teaching from Scripture. First, Jesus called Himself the Son of Man. And as we saw above from Daniel chapter 7, that's no small claim. John doesn't tell us how Nicodemus received the claim, since Nicodemus doesn't speak again in this chapter. But that was a huge hint to Nicodemus about who Jesus is.

Then Jesus turned to something Nicodemus would have been familiar with, an incident from Torah found in the book of Numbers. This incident occurred in the last stages of Israel's forty years of wandering in the desert. Thus, we read in Numbers 21:4-7, "4 From Mount Hor they [Israel] set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.' [meaning the manna] 6 Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 7 And the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people."

Yahweh answered Moses' prayer in a most unusual way. Numbers 21:8-9, "8 And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live." In effect, Yahweh said to Moses, "make an idol." Indeed, much later in Israel's history the bronze snake on a pole that Moses had made had to be destroyed by Hezekiah, king of Judah, because the people were worshipping it as an idol. (2Kings 18:4)

So, why did Yahweh command Moses to make this thing? Why did Yahweh give it power to heal from deadly poison when someone merely looked at it from anywhere in the Israelite camp as it was elevated for all to see on its pole? It only makes sense as a picture of what Messiah would eventually do. Therefore, to this day, from anywhere in the world, any human being can look to Jesus lifted up from the earth in crucifixion, in resurrection and finally in ascension, and be healed of the deadly poison of Original Sin and personal sin. Anyone can look to Messiah Jesus in faith and thereby become acceptable to Yahweh as 100 percent righteous.

Thus, the subsequent teachings that Jesus spoke make sense. John 3:16-18, "16 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.'"

These verses tell us that Jesus was not sent into the world to condemn us. He didn't have to. As descendants of Adam and Eve we're born into this world condemned already because of Original Sin and the consequent unbelief we'll exhibit later in life. Instead, through the Love of God, Jesus was sent into the world precisely to save us from this deadly fate. Faith in His person and in His work on the cross delivers from the condemnation we all deserve.

But, we're all in the same predicament Nicodemus was in. No one can come to saving faith in Jesus Christ without Lord Holy Spirit. No one can see the kingdom of God or enter it without the new birth that Lord Holy Spirit provides.

Now, Lord Holy Spirit doesn't work among us in a vacuum. It says in Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." This means that Lord Holy Spirit causes preaching of the Word to happen, as well as administration of the sacraments. He does this through calling men to the ordained ministry. He does this through calling both men and women to various lay ministries. Thus, Lord Holy Spirit fills the air with speech about Jesus. Lord Holy Spirit draws people to all this talk and then uses it to give the new birth, the birth from above.

Jesus said in verse 7 that we must be born again. That's absolute. There is no way into the kingdom of God without birth from above. But how shall we describe this new birth? I remember when my youngest child was born and I saw him for the first time, just minutes old. His eyes were wide open, looking around him with an expression of total wonder on his face — as in, what is this, who are these people? So, it is with those born of the Spirit. We enter a new, unfamiliar world — a world where Yahweh, the Son — Jesus — is central; a world where Jesus is real! For, we now know something that the world doesn't know. Everything revolves around Jesus. And for the first time in our lives we're no longer at the center of everything. He is! Those born from above cry out with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" I didn't know who you were. I was blind. But now I see.

Since everything in this universe revolves around our Creator's righteousness, and since Jesus is His righteousness for us, those born again are caught up in the pure righteousness of Messiah Jesus. For they have undergone an internal healing from the serpent's deadly bite of condemnation, death and hell by looking at and believing in the righteous Son of Man whom Yahweh has lifted up on the pole of the cross in order to save them.

And there's more. Like a child who has just been born, there is plenty of subsequent experience for the person who undergoes the new birth in Jesus Christ. For, like a newborn child, the person born from above initially knows very little about the Kingdom he has been born into and its King. Therefore, just like life in the flesh is for learning, so it is with life in the Spirit. We begin with only the smallest knowledge of the God/man who has delivered us from sin, death and the power of the devil. But the Christian life is for learning.

And the Christian life is for loving. The more we know about the man on the cross, the more we love Him who has first loved us with an everlasting Love.

It's also for living. For, the King of Life constantly beckons to the Christian with the beauty of His eternal righteousness life. We don't know what such eternal righteous life will be like. We can only see it from afar. But, in the present existence Christians have Lord Holy Spirit. He miraculously brings righteous living and righteous works into lives that won't be totally free from Original Sin until physical death. And in doing so, He shows the power of God to do the impossible in this corrupt world. So the Spirit blows where He wills with the children of God. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.