



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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“How can this be?”

St. John 3:9-21

Fr. William Klock

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Last Sunday we started looking at Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus in the third chapter of John’s Gospel. John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and one of the rulers of the Jews. He was an important man. He was probably upset by Jesus—another rabbi—who made a ruckus in the temple, throwing out the moneychangers. And so Nicodemus came to Jesus—at night and under the cover of darkness so that no one would see him—and he came to Jesus rabbi to rabbi. Actually, it was more like self-righteous, and condescending rabbi to rabbi. We don’t know what Nicodemus planned to say to Jesus, because Jesus cut to the chase. He could see through Nicodemus and so, like he did with everyone he met, Jesus showed Nicodemus what was in his heart and then undercut all the confidence he’d been putting in it. Nicodemus was proud of his birth. He was a Jew—a son of Abraham. And not just any son of Abraham, but an important, intelligent, and looked-up-to one at that. And Jesus told him: Flesh is flesh and will never be anything but flesh. Spirit is Spirit and if you want to be of the Spirit, you’ve got to be born from above by that Spirit. You’ve got to be born again. And so last week we looked at what it means to be born again from above—to have our hearts regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

The lights *started* coming on for Nicodemus. The Holy Spirit was doing something in his heart. But Nicodemus still didn’t fully understand. The same thing happens when we share the Gospel with people. There are times when you share the Good News—even times

when you haven’t even had a chance to explain all the most basic parts of it—and people are ready, the Spirit is at work in them, and they’re ready to say “Yes!” But most of the time they’ve got to understand more and they have to think it through. And that’s where we see Nicodemus: “Okay, Jesus. Unless I’m born from above I’ll always just be flesh. I need to be born again by the power of the Spirit. Let’s say that true. How?” Look at verses 9 and 10 of chapter 3:

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

This is exactly what we’re going to face when we start sharing the Gospel with people. They won’t understand. It’s especially hard to share the Gospel with someone like Nicodemus—a religious person who thinks they already know everything there is to know about God or who thinks that they’ve already satisfied God’s requirements to get into heaven. Nicodemus even had the Bible—he knew it inside and out—and yet he didn’t understand. If one of the great teachers of Israel didn’t get it, think about everyone else.

The first problem people face is simply that they don’t know. That’s everyone at some point in time. There was a point when every one of us had not heard the Gospel. Jesus answered Nicodemus in verse 11, saying:

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen...

If all we’ve ever heard or seen are things of the world, things of the world will be all we know. Scripture affirms that as we look at God’s creation we can learn quite a bit about God, but there’s also a lot of critical information that is *not* available through natural revelation. Nature doesn’t tell us that we’re sinners; it doesn’t tell us that we need a Saviour;

it doesn’t point us to Jesus as the Saviour. That’s why we need God’s direct revelation in Scripture. That’s why you and I need to share that message with others.

And yet Nicodemus *had* the Bible. He had God’s revelation. He knew it backwards and forwards, inside and out and he still didn’t understand and that points to our second problem. It’s not that the Bible is somehow hard to understand. God’s purpose isn’t to hide himself in the Scriptures so that only those with the Holy Spirit’s secret decoder ring or those who have some special knowledge can tease him out. Jesus goes on in verse 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.

The problem is that we refuse the message. “You do not receive our testimony.” The Gospel message of the cross offends people who are full of pride and who are confident in themselves. The problem isn’t that the message isn’t clear. The problem is that our unregenerate hearts are full of sin and that our unregenerate wills are broken and fixed on everything other than—*anything*—but God and his truth. That’s why repentance of sin and trust in Jesus can *only* come after the Holy Spirit has begun his work of regeneration and renewal. In Ephesians 4:18 St. Paul describes us before the Spirit does his work: “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, *due to their hardness of heart.*” The first problem is that we’re ignorant. The second problem is that we refuse the truth when we hear it, because it offends our sinful hearts. This is why we need to undergird our evangelism with prayer. We can share the message. Only God can regenerate hearts.

But I want to move on from the problem to focus on the answer that Jesus gives to Nicodemus. The Holy

Spirit *was* working in Nicodemus' heart while Jesus was dispelling his ignorance. Jesus said you have to be born again from above. Nicodemus said, "Okay, but how can this be?" What Jesus explained to him should be part of the message that we share with people. Look with me first at verses 14 and 15:

And 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.

Unless we're sharing the Gospel with a Jewish person we probably aren't going to use the same illustration that Jesus did, but if we're telling someone that they must be born again, we need to explain to them the *cause* of that new birth. Nicodemus asked, "How can I be born again?" Jesus says: *because of the sacrifice of the Son of Man.*

Jesus draws on two well-known Old Testament stories here. First he takes Nicodemus back to the book of Daniel. In chapter 7 of that book, Daniel had a vision and he saw "the Ancient of Days"—a reference to God the Father—on his heavenly throne. Then he saw that "with clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom". What Daniel saw was the ascension of Jesus into heaven. "Son of Man" was Daniel's title for the triumphant Messiah as he saw him ruling his kingdom—God himself who had humbled himself to take on human flesh so that he could save us from our sins. Jesus tells Nicodemus: It's by the sacrifice of that Son of Man that new birth is made possible.

Jesus also points Nicodemus back the time when the Israelites were in the wilderness of Sinai. In Numbers 21 we read how the people grumbled and

rebelled against God, so he sent fiery serpents into the camp as punishment. The snakes bit the people and whoever was bitten died. The people realise their sin and asked Moses to go to God on their behalf. That's when God told Moses to cast a serpent in bronze and to put it on a pole. Those who were bitten only had to look up to the bronze serpent on the pole and they would live.

What Jesus is saying is that like the Israelites, we've all sinned—we've all swallowed the deadly poison of the Serpent—and we face death as our punishment. But the Son of Man has come into the world to take our curse—our sin—on himself and to be lifted up on the cross for our sake. We think that the way of salvation is through our good works. Jesus says no. Salvation comes when we simply admit our sin and look in faith to the cross—to the crucified Christ—for forgiveness. Jesus says, "You *must* be born again." But he also says, "As Moses lifted up the serpent...so *must* the Son of Man be lifted up." Those two things go together. Jesus died so that we can be born again.

So the *cause* of the new birth is the *sacrifice of the Son*. In verse 16 Jesus tells us the *reason*. It's because of *the love of the Father*.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

I bet that most of us here probably know those words by heart. Think about what they mean. They tell us that we can be born again, that we can be saved from our sin and its consequences because God loves the world.

God created the world to be a good place for us. He created us to love and worship him and called it all good. And the next thing the Bible tells us is that we questioned his goodness and

rejected his sovereignty. We rebelled against him and turned to evil. From that point on the picture that the Bible paints of humanity is sin: hate, murder, war, dishonesty, greed, pain, suffering...the list goes on. And we don't need the Bible to tell us what humanity is like. All we have to do is look around us.

There are people in the world who think they're different—that they're morally better than everyone else or that they've somehow risen above the world's sin. It's true: some of us are worse than others. But what if we could somehow print out a transcript of every thought you've had in the last twenty-four hours—or maybe even just since you woke up this morning. Would you want that posted on the notice board in the parish hall? We can put on a good face before other people, but we can't hide from God. In Psalm 139 the Psalmist wrote: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me!... You discern my thoughts from afar...and are acquainted with all my ways" (Psalm 139:1-3). We all need to be born again. How can it be? Jesus says it can be because the Father loves us and sent his own Son to die for our sins—because the loving Father sent his Son. Even when we were his enemies, he loved us. When we had no desire at all to be reconciled to him, he loved us and sent his Son to make a way for it to happen.

People look at the sin in the world and ask why God doesn't do something about it. Brothers and sisters, God has done something about it. He has made it possible for us to be born again and it cost him his own Son. J.I. Packer wrote, "The measure of love is how much it gives, and the measure of the love of God is the gift of His only Son to be made man, and to die for sins, and so to become the one mediator who can bring us to God. No wonder Paul speaks of God's love as 'great' and passing knowledge!"

How can this be? Jesus first said that the *sacrifice of the Son* is the cause of new birth. Then he said that the *love of the Father* is the reason. Who thinks that the third part of the answer has something to do with the Holy Spirit? Yes. Jesus goes on in verses 19-21:

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

Chapter one told us that Jesus is the light and that he came into the world to shine his light into the darkness. But he ascended into heaven and sent his Holy Spirit who now shines the light of Christ through his life-giving word. How can this be? How can I be born again? It's because the light of Christ is shining today through the *illuminating work of the Holy Spirit*. This is the *means* of the new birth.

St. Peter wrote, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, *through the living and abiding word of God*" (1 Peter 1:23). The Psalmist wrote, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). It's a light shining in the darkness and it shines brightly when it's read and preached and lived out and witnessed and as the Holy Spirit speaks to people through it. In John 16:13-14 Jesus said, "The Spirit of truth...will guide you into all the truth...He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Nicodemus asked how we can be born again. Jesus told him the Good News. There is new life for us through his death, it's because the Father loves us, and that it's the Holy Spirit who

shines his light into the darkness, sharing the Good News and making our hearts ready to receive it.

Let me close by asking: What happened to Nicodemus? The story here in chapter three ends without any resolution. He heard the message, but we don't know what he did with it. He turns up again in chapter seven, where he speaks up for Jesus before the Sanhedrin and that suggests that the Holy Spirit was at work in his heart. Here he comes to Jesus in the dark, not wanting anyone to know. A few chapters later he was willing to stand up for Jesus in the light and before the authorities. Three years later Jesus was lifted up on the cross just as he said he would be and Nicodemus was there to see it. If he hadn't seen the light before that point, he saw it then. He knew it wasn't just a teacher or a rabbi on the cross; he saw his Saviour and as he looked on his Saviour, he saw his sins washed away by the blood of Jesus and was born again.

We know that because of what John tells us next. John says, "Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came." Nicodemus finally came to Jesus in the light of day and publicly identified himself with his Saviour. "So it is," Jesus said, "with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

And yet none of that had happened yet as Jesus told Nicodemus about the new birth here in chapter three. This is a reminder to us that our witness is never wasted. Nicodemus reminds us that we need to be persistent—following up with people after we share the good news with them—asking about their souls and encouraging them to seek the truth about Jesus. We need to be praying

for them and for the Holy Spirit to do his work of regeneration in their hearts. Nicodemus finally reminds us not to underestimate the power of planting the seeds of the Gospel. We just need to tell people: You must be born again. The sacrifice of the Son, the love of the Father, and the regenerating and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit make it possible.

Let us pray: Father, thank you that while we were yet sinners, you loved us and sent your Son to die for our sins. Thank you for sending your Holy Spirit that he might turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. Let us not keep that good news of the Gospel to ourselves, Father, but give us opportunities to share it with the people around us, eyes to see those opportunities, and boldness to take advantage of them. We ask this through Jesus our Lord. Amen.