

# “Nicodemus (Part 1)”

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The Reverend Stanley J. Jenkins  
Market Square Presbyterian Church

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John 3:1-17

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the [Judeans]. 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 unless God is with that person.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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.” 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? “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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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. “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.*

May the words of my mouth  
And the meditations of all of our hearts  
Be acceptable in thy sight  
O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.  
Amen

There’s a lot going on in our passage for this morning. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a leader of the Judeans. He is among the “teachers of Israel” who fear Jesus and his message. Yet, despite his professional fear, Nicodemus still comes. He’s Jesus-curious—but not quite there yet.

Indeed, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, which in John’s gospel indicates a kind of blindness—he misses the forest for the trees. When Jesus tells

him he must be born anew, born from above—the word in Greek can mean both—he asks, obtusely, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

“Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Jesus asks in response, revealing just how afraid the pharisee is to go deep. The question is, given this fear, can Nicodemus’ heart and his mind be opened to the light that shines in the darkness? Can OUR hearts and minds be opened?

Spoiler alert. They can. Clearly, Nicodemus, who only appears in the fourth gospel, and whose name in Greek means literally “victory of the people,” is meant by John to serve as a kind of model for faith formation—for enlightenment, liberation, salvation.

Indeed, we will meet Nicodemus two more times in John’s gospel. The second time, the chief priests and his fellow pharisees, in their fear of Jesus and his message, try to get the temple police to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus, to the consternation of his fellow teachers of Israel, outs himself—in the light of day—as one who stands up for the unjustly accused. “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” he asks. Here is a man who is learning to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with his God.

The third and last time we see Nicodemus is at Jesus’ tomb, where he has come to help prepare the body for burial. “Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night,” John tells us, “also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.” He brings an outrageous, extravagant, superabundance of herbs—as outrageous, extravagant, and superabundant as the gallons upon gallons of water Jesus turned into wine at the wedding in Cana—far more than ever could be used, far more than was practical, or that you could ever get your head around—as outrageous, extravagant, and

superabundant as God's love for the world. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy," Jesus says. "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

When we first meet Nicodemus he comes at night, by the end of the gospel, we see him in the light of day. He has been enlightened. He has come to know Jesus and his extravagant love, and he has learned how to love extravagantly. Here is a man who has been born from above.

So how does that happen? How do we, ourselves, find enlightenment?

Perhaps the first thing to understand is that to be born from above, is to be born of the spirit—and that is something that we cannot control. "The wind blows where it chooses," Jesus says, "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." Jesus is engaging in more word-play here. In Greek, the word for spirit and wind are the same.

Whatever else being born from above means, it means disabusing ourselves of any notion that we can control the Spirit. It happens the way God chooses it to happen. It cannot be reduced to any discrete "born again" experience. It cannot be reduced to any simplistic or surface notion of having a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," or "accepting him as your lord and savior."

The wind blows where it chooses—and not only is it OK to NOT know where it comes from or where it goes—spiritual rebirth requires a LETTING GO of the NEED to know—and insofar as any claim to know is wrong-headed, because this so called knowledge is so far beyond our finite ability to comprehend, it requires an un-knowing—a learning to let go of what we think we know—that we might be opened to learn—it requires that, like Nicodemus, we come at night.

John Calvin taught that scripture is accommodated to our finite ability to understand. God speaks baby-talk to us in scripture. Nonetheless, according to Calvin, everything we need to know can be found in scripture—and all we need to know is simply that we have God’s favor—that we are loved. Simply loved.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” Jesus says, “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” In John’s gospel “the world” stands for the realm that opposes heaven, the realm in which death reigns, the realm in which might makes right, and the vulnerable and marginalized are oppressed.

“The world” is the realm that God descends into in Jesus Christ, emptying himself of every divine prerogative—as we read in Paul’s letter to the Philippians—taking the form of one who is just like us, that is, enslaved in this realm of darkness—trapped in this nightmare world of one thing after another—a seemingly endless stream of bad news—five year olds in blue bunny hats being detained by masked federal agents—bombs dropped on foreign countries to distract the domestic populace—until we become paralyzed in fear and anger.

So outrageous, extravagant, and superabundant is God’s love that it overflows God’s self, emptying out God’s self—pouring God’s self into the world—pouring out the Realm of Heaven, the Kingdom of God—into you and me who yet live in the world—that God’s love might overflow us as well, and pour out into the whole of God’s creation—that all might be restored, all might be healed—and in the words of scripture, that God might be “all in all.”

“But God proves his love for us,” the Apostle Paul writes, “in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”—not necessarily in the sense of “instead of us,” in a substitutionary atonement, as if someone had to be punished to satisfy God’s wrath—but in the sense of God is “for us,” “pro nobis.” God chooses us.

God so loved us that God chooses to enter into the fullness of the realm of darkness into which we have fallen, even unto death upon a cross—even being broken on an instrument of state terror and torture—that we might know the victory of the realm of light—the light that cannot be overcome by darkness. Because in our chains we could not come to God—God came to us—and broke our chains.

Friends, whatever else being born from above means—it means becoming a conduit for the breaking in of the realm of heaven into the realm of the world—the breaking in of the Kingdom of God into the realm of cynicism, authoritarianism, and hate—the breaking in of love.

It is, indeed, true that there is a lot going on in our passage for this morning. We're not done yet with Nicodemus—any more than God is done with us. So tune in next week for part 2. Same time. Same bat channel. Amen.