



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Lent 4 (B)

#### **Born From Above**

**[RCL] Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21**

Our Gospel passage today is the end of a conversation Jesus had with the Pharisee Nicodemus.

Some might hear that Nicodemus is a Pharisee and immediately cast him in a negative light. For that reason, a hearer could be tempted to imagine his conversation with Jesus as an adversarial one. But that need not be the case. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is an educated man, a “pillar of the community,” we might say in today’s parlance.

Several verses before today’s text begins, we learn that Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night. Again, we might be tempted to think the worst of Nicodemus. Perhaps he doesn’t want to be seen with Jesus, and so is trying to slip in to see him under the cover of darkness. However, some commentators note that coming at night could be a way that Nicodemus honors Jesus. Coming on his own time, after a full day’s work, demonstrates that Nicodemus is motivated by a genuine desire to learn from him.

If we understand their encounter this way, then the Nicodemus we meet in today’s text is less an adversarial teacher preparing to argue with a colleague and more an eager student visiting a teacher during office hours in order to check for understanding.

Upon arriving, Nicodemus says to Jesus, “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.” In other words, he’s seeking clarity, as if to say, “It seems to me that we know that you come from God because, otherwise, you wouldn’t be able to do the things that you do.”

It seems like a sincere conversation starter. Jesus’ response, however, is anything but clear—“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Huh? Surely Jesus could have at least been a bit more affirming of Nicodemus. Some of the best teachers have the ability to affirm any sort of participation. Maybe Jesus could have said something like, “Yes, Nicodemus. I think that’s a great way to begin to think about who I am, but there’s more to it than that.”

Alas, that's not really Jesus' style. Another example follows when Nicodemus asks an important question.

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Again, we could read Nicodemus as adversarial or sarcastic, but the question could just as easily be one of honest curiosity. Still, Jesus doesn't exactly simplify things.

"Very truly, I tell you," he says, "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."

Sure, Jesus' response may sound confusing to Nicodemus – and to us. But maybe that's the point. Perhaps Jesus is doing what a lot of good teachers do—instead of providing a simple explanation or answer, he challenges his student to think more about it for himself.

Can you remember a teacher in your life who didn't answer your questions simply or directly so much as they helped you to develop the skills necessary to answer them for yourself? That's a sign of a good teacher. Jesus uses this classic *teach-a-man-to-fish* approach with Nicodemus, and the result is a first-class theological discourse.

Yes, like all theological discussions, it's confusing. Jesus is attempting to reframe Nicodemus' understanding of his relationship with God, and that's not something that he can explain to him in simple terms. Jesus needs Nicodemus to be able to make sense of it for himself, and so he uses another tried and true teaching—and preaching—tactic: a real-life example. You can't see the wind, he says, but you know it's there because you can hear it rustling the leaves of the trees and see the branches bend and sway. Where does the wind start? Where does it go? We don't know. It's intangible, abstract.

It's the same with "being born from above." How does that work exactly? It cannot be fully explained in a classroom with a piece of chalk or an overhead projector. (Or a dry-erase marker or "smart board," for that matter.)

We don't always see God's presence clearly labeled in the world around us. But, if we begin to pay attention, every once in a while, we will notice God's presence nonetheless—in transforming hearts, changing minds, and bending wills.

That is precisely what Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to do: start paying attention to the presence of God in his life. That's an especially important lesson for Nicodemus to learn because Jesus won't always be with him. At least, not in the same sense that he is on this night.

Jesus hints at this reality in the first verse of the portion of the passage we hear this morning. “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.”

As 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christians, we hear Jesus’ words in full knowledge of his death and resurrection. We can easily draw a parallel between the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness (which we also hear this morning from Numbers) and Jesus being lifted up on the cross.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, doesn’t know yet what’s going to happen to Jesus. But when he does find out, if he remembers this conversation with Jesus, he will learn for the first time the answer to his question.

“How can somebody be born from above?” Because Jesus died and rose again.

Jesus himself is the answer to Nicodemus’ important question. That’s what Jesus is trying to teach him. But Nicodemus will not—and cannot—completely understand this until he develops a relationship with Jesus. For that matter, neither can we.

Developing a relationship with Jesus doesn’t happen overnight. There is no simple how-to guide for the process, no matter what anyone says. It requires taking time to pay attention to Jesus, the Risen Christ, and his presence in our lives.

That just so happens to be a central task of the Lenten season.

Remember the words (from the Book of Common Prayer) that we heard on Ash Wednesday, when the presider said, “I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”

During Lent, Christians tend to focus on the self-denial part of that, but the rest is important, too. If we use the remaining days of Lent to lean into a period of self-examination, prayer, and scriptural meditation, then we will be walking with Nicodemus into a deeper relationship with our risen and living Lord.

Try, for instance, reading through the rest of John’s gospel account. You will get a sense of Nicodemus’ own journey with Jesus, and it just might inform your own.

In chapter seven, when others are plotting to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus speaks in his defense, even after several have turned against him. And in chapter 19, Nicodemus even joins Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus’ body for burial after it’s taken down from the cross.

When he helped lay Jesus in the tomb that day, Nicodemus didn't know what would happen in just two days' time. We do. That's all the more reason for us to be on the lookout for Jesus' presence in our lives. If we do that, then we can—right alongside Nicodemus—experience the joy of that beautiful Sunday morning all over again, even as if for the very first time.

*The Rev. Warren Thomas Swenson is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester, where his research focuses on queer theology and homiletics. Warren also serves as associate priest of Southeast Tennessee Episcopal Ministry (STEM), a system of yoked congregations in the Diocese of Tennessee. He lives in Sewanee with his husband, Walker.*

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017 © 2024 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved. When using this sermon in part or in whole, please credit verbally or in print Sermons That Work, a ministry of The Episcopal Church, and the original author.