

“You Must Be Born From Above”

John 3:1-17

As is appointed by our church year calendar, being in Series A of the three year common lectionary, we are going to spend most of this year in the Gospel of Matthew. That is where we have been, but other than Easter Sunday, we will not see Matthew again until we return to his Gospel after Pentecost. In the meantime, we are going to hear a lot from the Gospel of John.

And today, we get to hear some of the most famous words in all of Scripture. John 3:16 is quotable, memorizable, and is often referred to as the most clear presentation of the Gospel in all of Scripture (I personally think that the words of Institution are the most clear presentation of the Gospel, but that is an argument for another day). The point is that these words are important. The risk is that we skip over the words that lead up to that verse.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. John really knows how to tell a story. Details matter. Nicodemus comes at night, in the darkness. He is in the dark, but he thinks that he is one of the enlightened ones. And he says to Jesus, “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.”

The Jews were always fascinated by the signs and wonders of the miracles. The problem was that seeing signs and miracles so rarely translate into faith in the Word of God. And Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is looking for confirmation of who Jesus is in the wrong place. Jesus is going to prove that whatever Nicodemus was believing or feeling about Jesus at the time, his faith was “incomplete” to say the least. Jesus tells him (as we hear in English), “unless one is born [again] he cannot **see** the kingdom of God” – let alone enter it.

And Jesus is going to lead Nicodemus to where he needs to be – that, He is leading him to repentance and faith. Jesus says, “You must be born (in the Greek) ‘anwthen’, which is a Greek word which has two meanings ‘from above’ or ‘again.’ So the question is, “what did Jesus say and what did Nicodemus hear.” The key to good communication is for the hearer to hear what the speaker intended to say. This is why I write out my sermons and do my best to stick to the manuscript, because I get myself into trouble when I start thinking out loud.

Nicodemus is going to struggle with understanding, not because Jesus isn’t being clear. Jesus is trying to proclaim to him the reality of what the kingdom of God is and the reality that Nicodemus does not see the kingdom in the right light – he thinks he is enlightened, but he is really in the dark. Nicodemus proves this by hearing these “heavenly” words that we must be born “from above” and he only hears this in an earthly way.

In attempting to understand, Nicodemus shows how far he is from the truth. Nicodemus answers by reiterating a question that has nothing to do with what Jesus actually said. Nicodemus asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

It is often confusing for us also because our modern translators translate what Nicodemus hears rather than what Jesus says. Jesus didn’t say anything about being born “again” from a womb a second time. He said you must be begotten “from above.” Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and one of the rulers of the Jews – for having such a lofty position in the religious community, his level of understanding is sorely lacking.

Jesus says, “You must be born of water and the Spirit if you expect to enter the kingdom of God.” Notice how Jesus has made a shift now from seeing the kingdom of God to entering it. If you cannot see the kingdom of God, how can you enter it? And if you do not enter the kingdom of God, how will you ever participate in the blessings God offers within His kingdom?

You must be born of water and the Spirit. This is Baptism talk. This is where you enter the kingdom of God. This is where you begin to participate in the kingdom of God. If you are not joined to the kingdom of God and are not participating in it, you do not have the Spirit or the Light of Christ – you are in the dark.

Nicodemus is still in the dark and asks Jesus, “How can these things be?” Again, “You are a teacher of Israel, and you don’t understand these things?” Jesus says, “This is the easy stuff to believe compared to what I am going to be telling you in the future. These are ‘earthly things.’ What’s going to happen when you are confronted with heavenly things? And I am the One who is going to reveal to you ‘heavenly things,’ because no one has ascended into heaven except the One who descended from heaven – the Son of Man, the Messiah.

If you can’t believe what I am telling you about being born by water and the Spirit, what are you going to do when the Son of Man is lifted up on a cross the way Moses lifted up the serpent on a pole in the wilderness? Remember, the fiery snakes were in the Israelite camp as a punishment from God and God instructed Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole, and if anyone was bitten, if they looked to the bronze snake, they would live. If they did not look, they would die.

The Son of Man has been lifted up on the cross. We look to Him and we live. If we remain in the dark, if we reject Baptism, if we reject the faith of our Baptism, if we do not believe ‘heavenly things,’ we die.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son to be that snake on the pole for you and me, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Amen.