

**3: 16**

1 of Series 3:16

John 3: 1-21 (1-3; 16)

08-02-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

**Introduction**

**Nicodemus** waited until nightfall to visit Jesus. The shadows provided a dark cloak of privacy for the encounter. They would be able to enjoy a conversation apart from the daytime crowds. OR maybe the privacy of a face-to-face meeting was only an excuse for secrecy. Jesus *had* caused quite a stir when he cleansed the Temple (John 1:12-16), and many of the religious leaders already opposed him. So Nicodemus played it safe by balancing curiosity with caution.

**I. Nic at Night**

1) Nicodemus was a character of curious contrasts. In many ways, he represented the best of the Jewish faith. He was a member of the **Pharisees**—a strict religious sect in Judaism. The Pharisees were called “*the Separate Ones*” because they sought to separate themselves from the sinful world by their holy lifestyles. The goal was to strictly follow God’s Law in daily life.

2) Nicodemus was also a member of “*the Jewish ruling council.*” (John 3:1) A seventy member group called “the **Sanhedrin**” was the religious ruling body for Israel. A position on the council held great prestige and power.

3) Finally, Jesus himself described Nicodemus as “*Israel’s teacher.*” (John 3:10). The Pharisee served as a **rabbi** or teacher, instructing others in God’s Law. He taught people how to apply God’s Word to the world.

The evidence indicates that Nicodemus was intrigued with this itinerant minister from Galilee. Word of his teaching, preaching, signs, and miracles had quickly spread. Surely this man from Nazareth was a prophet of God. So Nicodemus greeted Jesus as an equal when he said: “*Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.*”

**II. Born Again and Born From Above**

Note that Nicodemus used the plural pronoun of “*we.*” Jesus’ ministry had obviously impressed some of Judaism’s movers and shakers. One would expect the Lord to express his appreciation or even repay the compliment. However, Jesus brushed aside the flattering words and social niceties. Instead, the Lord got straight to the point. He said to Nicodemus: “*I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*” (John 3: 3)

“*I tell you the truth*” is an important phrase in John’s Gospel. Other versions of the Bible translate the words as “*Verily, verily*” or “*Truly, truly.*” When Jesus begins a sentence with these words, it is like a teacher saying: “*This is going to be on the test!*” What follows is crucial.

Jesus told Nicodemus: “*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is **born again**.*” The phrase “*born again*” comes from a Greek word (“*anōthen*”) which can also be translated as “*born from above*.” Both meanings were present in Jesus’ words. The only way humanity can enter into God’s kingdom is to be born again; and this is a gift that only comes from above.

In Christ, we have the opportunity to become new creations in whom the old has passed away and the new has come. Those accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord begin anew. We are freed from a sinful past and enabled to enter into a new relationship with God. John Wesley called this “*the new birth*” as we become God’s people.

Max Lucado wrote that “*birth, by definition, is a passive act . . . . The mother pays the price of birth . . . . Spiritual rebirthing requires a capable parent, not an able infant.*” (3:16 Words of Hope, p. 6) The first and last word of the gospel is always **GRACE**: God’s salvation is something that we cannot earn or deserve. In Jesus Christ, we are freely offered the gift of eternal life.

Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again. However, the Pharisee stared at him in bafflement. He finally sputtered: “*How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!*”

Max Lucado wrote: “*Nicodemus inhabits a land of good efforts, sincere gestures, and hard work. Give God your best his philosophy says, and God does the rest. Jesus’ response? You best won’t work. Your finest efforts don’t mean squat. Unless you are born again, you can’t even see what God is up to.*” (3:16, Lucado, p. 5)

Many people continue to find themselves in Nicodemus’ shoes. They know all too well the NECESSITY of change. How often do folk think to themselves, “If I had it to do all over again” or “If I only knew then what I know now.” “*A do over. A try again. A reload A mulligan would be nice.*” (3:16, Lucado, p. 5). However, they cannot comprehend the POSSIBILITY of such a change. The chance to be born again and begin anew seems too good to be true.

### **III. Water and the Spirit**

Jesus explained his words to Nicodemus: “*I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of **water and the Spirit**.*” Those who are born again from above are born of both water and the Spirit.

In one sense, Jesus took Nicodemus misunderstanding and built upon it. Entry into God’s kingdom requires both an earthly birth with the breaking of water AND a heavenly birth of the Holy Spirit. Both require intense labor and occasional pain. Each ultimately results in new life.

The church also heard Jesus’ words as **baptism imagery**. Water symbolizes how God’s forgiveness washes us clean. The waters of baptism are “*an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace*” present in God’s children. In baptism, our sinful nature is washed away. The old person is put to death, and we are raised to new life.

“*Water*” symbolizes cleansing, and “*Spirit*” signifies power. When we enter God’s kingdom, the Holy Spirit provides us with the power to be transformed. From first to last, the Christian faith is an experience of grace. John Wesley talked about God’s prevenient (preparing), justifying (saving), and sanctifying (perfecting) grace. The Spirit

empowers us to become the people that God always intended us to be. This is a lifelong process as we are *“changed from glory, unto glory, till in heaven we take our place.”*

#### **IV. Lifted Up**

Jesus then recalled an odd incident from Israel’s past. The Lord said: *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”* (John 3:15). No doubt Nicodemus immediately recognized the story Jesus referenced. However, most of us have never read about this bizarre, Old Testament episode described in **Numbers 21**.

During the Exodus, God delivered the Jews from Egyptian slavery. The Lord promised to deliver his people to the Promised Land. Due to their disobedience, the Jews ultimately wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before crossing the Jordan into Israel.

In the wilderness, the Jews began to grumble and complain against Moses and God. It got to the point where they even said, *“We want to go back to Egypt!”* Back to Egypt—to the land of slavery and death where the pharaoh had ordered the murder of all the newborn Hebrew boys.

In order to discipline the people and call them back to repentance, God sent a plague of deadly, fiery serpents. When the Israelites cried out for mercy, God told Moses to make an image of the serpent and hold it up on a pole in the middle of the camp. Everyone who looked upon the image of the serpent was healed.

Jesus used this graphic imagery to foretell how he would be *“lifted up”* upon the cross and die for humanity’s sins. John used the same verb to describe how Jesus would also be *“lifted up”* to glory in his resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven. Salvation is offered to all people at the cross and empty tomb.

#### **V. The Gospel in Miniature: John 3: 16**

After recalling the Old Testament story, Jesus said: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* **John 3: 16** has been called *“the Gospel in miniature.”* The verse encapsulates and summarizes what God has done for us in Jesus the Christ.

Humanity cannot begin to comprehend the height, width, and depth of **God’s love**. The Bible is the story of our Creator who constantly and continually seeks relationship with his people. The Old Testament recounts the tales of a covenant making, covenant breaking people and a covenant making, covenant keeping God.

God loved the world so much that he sent his own Son. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection opened the way into heaven’s kingdom. All who receive by faith the gift of salvation receive eternal life.

Today we are beginning a seven week worship series that explores **John 3:16**. The series is based upon a book by **Max Lucado** entitled **3:16 The Numbers of Hope**. In the book, Lucado examines each phase of this well known and loved verse. In the introduction, the author wrote: *“If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here.”* (8) Lucado declares that *“the verse is an alphabet of grace.”* (9)

Many of us have already memorized by the verse. By the end of the series, it is my hope that each person here will have it engrained upon their hearts and minds. If you are uncertain about the words, it is printed on the bulletin (projected on the screen). Recite the verse with me: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

## **VI. Condemnation and Salvation**

Jesus told Nicodemus: *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”* (John 3:17-18)

God’s intent and plan is to save the world and all his children. The Lord is our heavenly Father who wants the very best for his children. BUT we are people of free will who can accept or reject the divine gift of grace. There are moments in life when we have to decide. We must choose for God or against God. When we encounter Jesus Christ, this decision is forced upon us. Who we are is determined by our response to Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

Nicodemus got much more than a theological debate with Jesus that night. He encountered God’s radical call to transformation and change. The bad news is that he sought Jesus out in the darkness; the good news is that he sought Jesus out.

Nicodemus appeared two other times in John’s Gospel. On the second occasion, he tentatively defended Jesus’ ministry before his fellow Jewish leaders. (John 7:50-52) Later, he would join Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus’ body for burial after the crucifixion. No further word is recorded about his life; however, I would like to think that Nicodemus also encountered the risen Lord after Easter Sunday morning. And by God’s grace, he hopefully discovered first hand what it means to be born again from above.

Perhaps today you find yourself in Nicodemus’ shoes. You’ve heard the stories about Jesus. Maybe you have attended church for years. You can recite the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles Creed, and you know the words to the Gloria Patri and the Doxology. But you still find yourself searching in the dark for something more. That “something more” is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Today we are offered the same gift that was offered to Nicodemus that dark night—the chance to be born again from above. We don’t know how Nicodemus’ story ended and whether the curious but cautious man ever accepted Christ’s offer of new life. However, we can know how our stories end. Today is the day when we can know beyond a shadow of doubt that we are God’s people.

Louise Fletcher composed a poem in which she dreamed:

*I wish that there were some wonderful place  
Called **the Land of Beginning Again**  
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches*

*And all of our selfish grief  
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat by the door  
And never be put on again.*

There is such a place in God's kingdom. Jesus' words continue to ring in our ears today: You **MUST** be born again. Yet the good news of the gospel is: We **CAN** be born again from above.

When we encounter Jesus today, we each must decide how we will respond. Delaying the decision is a decision itself. Harold Cox once said, "*Not to decide is to decide.*"

You **MUST** be born again. You **CAN** be born again. And the new birth can begin today. You decide.

Amen.