

**Nick At Night
John 3: 1-17
Don Lincoln**

Most of us know, have heard of, or seen the citation of one verse in this passage: John 3:16. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son. That whoso believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” It’s not uncommon for me to use it as an assurance of pardon in our liturgy. It’s the very first memory verse I ever learned in Sunday School.

Sunday School was where many of us also learned this verse as essentially Christianity 101 — a simple formula for faith, a handy evangelism tool, and a perfect summary of the Gospel. If you’ve had your eyes open at all, you’ve probably seen it on billboards, t-shirts, coffee mugs, and cross-stitch samplers. The guy with the rainbow hair used to show up at sporting events with the verse on a sign, and quarterback Tim Tebow had it on the eye-black below his eyes when he played football.

Father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther called this verse “the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature.” In just twenty-five (or twenty-seven words in the version I memorized), the verse describes a loving God, a cherished world, a self-giving Son, a universal invitation, a deliverance from death, and a promise of eternal life. Christianity in a nutshell, right?¹

Maybe so for you and me, but imagine what the rest of this conversation sounded like to Nicodemus.

Who IS Nicodemus? A Pharisee. But not just **A** Pharisee. A leader of the Jews — meaning he was one of THE leaders in the governing court of the Sanhedrin. Think of it this way. Cabinet level post, or Supreme Court judgeship. Or head of the department, endowed chair; tenured, on the doctoral review committee. A couple honorary doctorates and half a page in the Pharisee's annual "Who's Who" of Pharisees. Nicodemus is an expert; the quoted scholar; one of the ones they interview on CNN. Responsible and gifted as a teacher of the law; who also enacts and establishes the religious and political implications, and social outworkings of the law for the nation of Israel. He’s the man!

So what is he doing here? With Jesus?

We don’t know all Nicodemus has heard about Jesus. Maybe he’s heard about turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. (That happens in chapter 2 of the Gospel of John). He’s surely heard that Jesus turned over the tables in the temple (which happens a few verses earlier), and that people are flocking from all over the countryside

to hear this rebel Rabbi. What we do know, though, is Nicodemus is convinced Jesus is special. “We know that you are from God, for no one can do the things you are doing apart from the presence of God.” Nick wants more God!

“We know...” Nicodemus says. Is he speaking for the Sanhedrin, or is that simply a way of saying the collective “we” – like “me, myself and I?” I’m guessing it’s more of the latter. Because, after all he comes in secret – he comes at night. And why not?

Imagine the risk Nicodemus is taking – after decades of service, leadership, Phariseeing – it was an enormous risk for this man to step into the wilderness of a conversation with the guy who has just turned the temple upside down. How many of us seek out that kind of trouble, much less do so by the light of day?

Clearly, whatever compels Nicodemus to go talk to Jesus, whatever Nicodemus has heard ABOUT Jesus, doesn’t begin to compare to what he hears FROM Jesus.

“Nick – you must be born again – or more literally – born from above.”

“Say what?”

We laugh at Nicodemus – as if we all know exactly what Jesus means when He says that. But let’s put ourselves in Nick’s shoes. His entire life’s direction has been centered on the law, and the interpretation of it for the people and their well-being. He’s one of the more erudite scholars of his day. He is asking serious questions; God questions. And Jesus is talking in riddles. Born again. Born from above. Born anew.

Nicodemus finds Jesus’s words incomprehensible and says so. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? I’ve already got my AARP card and my senior discount. I may not have one foot in the grave, but getting born all over again sounds pretty absurd to me when it’s becoming more challenging to get out of bed in the morning after having to get up two or three times during the night. Heck, I need a step stool to get in a chariot these days! Born all over?? Are you NUTS?

Jesus answers him with more riddles. He speaks of birth, and water and flesh and spirit and wind. A wind that blows where it will – and Jesus is not talking about the weather. To which Nicodemus replies, “How can these things be? What on earth are you talking about, Jesus?”

This is the context in which Jesus utters this “Gospel in Miniature” – John 3: 16. Christianity 101. But it’s pretty clear to me Nicodemus is baffled.

And Jesus has no problem leaving Nicodemus confused and muddled. He was in no hurry to get Nicodemus to sign on the dotted line. The Spirit “blows where it chooses,” Jesus said. The Spirit cannot be caged; the Spirit cannot be contained. Which means the journey of faith and the workings of salvation can’t be caged or contained, either. When we speak of God’s kingdom, we are in a realm of deep mystery. Wilderness.

Whatever was not clear to Nicodemus, I think it was becoming clear to him that Jesus was not suggesting to him a “tune-up”, or a few minor tweaks to an already near-perfectly, faithful life; a modest adjustment to his religious roots. This was a brand **NEW** life. A new birth. A fresh, down to the foundations beginning. Think about what the metaphor means. What newborn enters the world without birth pangs, shock, disorientation, or pain? Bewilderment isn’t the exception in a birth story; it’s the rule.

You see, the problem for Nicodemus was that Jesus was turning everything upside down, making it God’s work, not his work. Jesus is not just turning the tables in the temple, but also Nicodemus’ way of thinking, believing, teaching.

We laugh at poor Nicodemus, who just doesn’t quite get it like we do. But – when was the last time some new idea rocked your world or my world? Can you name the times the framework, or foundation, or some essential lynchpin of your belief system was challenged in substance? I can. I remember when – decades ago - I was convinced that Scripture on the whole did NOT indicate women couldn’t be leaders in the church. It was a game changer for me and the people I was hanging with at the time. Or when my views on ordination standards and same gender marriage needed to be overturned. Radical shift.

For Nicodemus, this conversation with Jesus must’ve been more akin to what it was like for those very first people who talked with Copernicus, when he suggested the earth wasn’t the center of the universe but the sun was. “What?!” Or the people who happened to be in the public square when Galileo suggested the earth wasn’t flat. “You’re nuts!!” Or, let me put it this way: for some of us in here, the kind of conversation Nicodemus was having with Jesus, might be on the same gob-smacking level as someone suggesting you change political party affiliation. (NOW you’ve quit preaching, and gone to meddling, pastor!). Do you and I understand that this is THAT huge for Nicodemus!?

You must be born again means you and I must be open to the movement of the spirit, like the blowing of the wind, open to growth and change, even in our most deeply held convictions. For most of us, that feels like the wilderness. It’s scary! And yet that’s where God often takes us AND where God meets us.

Scholar NT Wright say this of Jesus’ message to Nick. “The point of this is that God’s kingdom is now thrown open to anyone and everyone – open to the entire world. The spirit is on the move, like a fresh spring breeze, and no human family, no tribe, no organization or no system can keep up with it. Opening the window and letting the breeze in can be very inconvenient, especially for the Nicodemuses of this world who supposed they have got things tidied up, labelled and sorted into neat piles.”²

We like neat piles, do we not? For a season the church thought they had the right pile. Then the orthodox thought they had the right doctrine, the one true church. Then the protestants said, “No you both are wrong, we know the truth.” The sub-protestants – the Lutherans or the Presbyterians – “No, we actually have it. And then the Baptists

came along and said “No, we’re the only ones who actually get it because you’re not using enough water!”

I am pretty confident we ALL have more to learn from the Spirit. And like Nick, you and I are likely to continue to find ourselves surprised by what God is doing. Which is why I love one of our Presbyterian Church affirmations that came out in the Presbyterian church in the late ‘90s, that goes this way:

Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, for "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God"

No one is saved apart from God's gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of "God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth." Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.³

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son. That whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” John 3:16 is a beautiful passage of scripture, and we are right to recite it, memorize it, and cherish it. But the way of faith it points to is as vast and mysterious as the workings of a human heart reaching out for the heart of God. The heart of the faith is not so much about reciting a Scripture text or professing doctrine, as it is a declaration of love and trust in this One who loved us first. After all, how many of your significant relationships thrive on doctrine, instead of love and trust?⁴

I think the nighttime chat with Jesus challenged Nicodemus deeply, and set off a three year journey at the time of his life when he probably would have much rather been thinking of retirement. I think it set Nicodemus to struggling, until three years later, when he finally stood up to be counted, identified himself with Jesus in a way no one could miss or misunderstand.⁵

At the end of this Gospel John tells us on the very day Jesus was crucified, after he was dead, two men, with great courage and at great risk, came to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and asked for the body of Jesus, took it down from the cross, anointed it with precious oils one of them had brought along, and buried the body in a garden tomb. One of the men was Joseph of Arimathea and you know who the other was?

Nicodemus, who this time, **in broad daylight**, showed he believed God was up to something in Jesus, and proved that day that he himself – Nicodemus – was more alive – born again, born anew, born from above, than he had ever been before, and was willing to give his life away for the sake of this one who showed God’s love to and for the world. May it be so for us. AMEN.

1. Debi Thomas; www.journeywithjesus.net, “*Where The Wind Blows*,” March 1, 2020.
2. N.T. Wright; *John for Everyone*; Commentary on the Gospel of John.
3. “*Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ*,” a paper on Christology developed by the PCUSA Office of Theology and Worship, and affirmed by the 2004 PCUSA General Assembly
4. Thomas, op. cit.
5. John Buchanan, “*Appointment After Dark*,” sermon at Fourth Presbyterian Church, January 24, 2010.