

Second Sunday in Lent

March 12, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint John. (John 3: 1-17)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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 apart from the presence of God." 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 a 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."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are the children of God. Here at Immanuel, we know something about children. In the past few months, we've welcomed several of them into this world. So today I want to start by thinking about infants. Picture an infant, a niece, or nephew, or grandchild. What do you see? When you picture an infant, what do you see? Anybody.

RESPONSE: Innocent.

Innocent.

RESPONSE: They're little.

They're little. Anything else?

RESPONSE: Potential.

Potential.

Okay. So, first off, infants are beautiful. They are just beautiful. They are sweet and adorable and hopeful. On the other hand, infants don't have a lot of coordination. They can't verbalize, so they cry. They can't take care of their most basic needs. They even need help to burp. Infants are the most vulnerable among us. They are carried, they are fed, they are diapered. They are brought into this world. They don't even have a lot of say about that either. They are powerless, vulnerable, and dependent. For those of us who are no longer infants, can you imagine what that is like - to be completely powerless, completely dependent?

No wonder Nicodemus didn't like the idea of being born again. But I get ahead of myself.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee who came to Jesus by night. By night. Waking up the household, getting everybody up out of bed. Why is he sneaking around? Doesn't he want anybody to know he's there? Possibly.

However, in the Gospel of John, we hear a lot about light and dark. "*The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.*" "*I am the light of the world.*" In John's Gospel, light is always about being able to see, being able to understand, catching the vision of God's dream, seeing the world as God's realm with possibility all around. The light shines so we can see.

Darkness is not being able to see God at work in the world, not getting it. Seeing the world as dark and fearful, with scarcity and harshness. For example, when Judas leaves the Last Supper to go and betray Jesus, John writes, "*And it was night.*" It was night. You can see Judas there in the darkness, not knowing what Jesus is about at all. Night.

So there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night. By night, because Nicodemus doesn't understand. He doesn't get what Jesus is all about. He comes with questions. There is something about this Jesus, but he's not sure what. He is in the dark. He comes to meet Jesus.

And now he's there, and it's the nighttime, and everybody is looking at him, wondering why he came. And he hardly knows what to say. So he starts with a compliment. "*Jesus, I know you are a teacher of God because of all the wonderful things you do.*" And he waits to see what Jesus will say. And Jesus offers him light. "*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*"

Nicodemus is confused. What is he talking about? How would I – why would I want to be born a second time, to start my life over? I have an education. I have friends. I have a position. I am self-sufficient. I am somebody. Maybe there are a few things I'd like to do over, but why would I choose to be powerless and vulnerable and dependent? Can you imagine? Who would want to go back and be born a second time?

But that is exactly what Jesus is talking about. What if we were to become like infants before God, letting God nurture us and teach us? What if we let God take us where God wants to go, instead of setting our own course? What if we depended on God's goodness and grace, instead of our own abilities? What if we were willing to just be loved by God?

Still, being born again does not look too good to Nicodemus. "*How can this be?*" he says. How does that work? Jesus tries again, "*No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.*" There is nothing we can do to be born. We don't achieve birth. We don't control birth. We receive it, as we receive the grace and love of God. As we receive the gifts and guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we receive purpose and calling in the Christian life. "But I have to be good, don't I?" "But, but I have to believe the right things, don't I?" Infants don't think in such terms. They just depend on the ones who love them, to nourish and protect, to guide and teach them as they grow and develop.

Anna Carter Florence puts it this way:

"We cannot bear ourselves. We never could and never will. Only the Spirit can do that. Only the Spirit can usher us from this world of fixed realities to God's realm of new possibilities."¹

Start over, says Jesus. Become like an infant in the presence of God. Humble, vulnerable, dependent. It is not easy. Birth is not easy. It is painful and messy and risky. So it is to be born of the Spirit, to open ourselves to God's power and God's and will.

And so it was with Nicodemus. That night, when he met with Jesus, was just the beginning. The birthing continued.

¹ Luther Seminary. Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence. (Kindle Locations 927-928).

In the Seventh Chapter of John, we hear from Nicodemus again. The religious leaders were angry because Jesus hadn't been arrested yet.

The Pharisees said,

“Are you carried away like the rest of the rabble? You don't see any of the leaders believing in him, do you? Or any of the Pharisees? It's only this crowd, ignorant of God's law, that is taken in with him, and cursed.”

Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus earlier and was both ruler and Pharisee, spoke up. *“Does our law decide about a man's guilt without first listening to him and finding out what he was doing?”* Nicodemus is entering into this world of the Spirit, not easily or without risk.

And again, at the end of the Gospel, we hear from Nicodemus one more time. When Jesus was crucified, and was being buried, Nicodemus came. He shows up with a virtual U-Haul of spices for Jesus. About a hundred pounds, it says, of spices. An obscene amount of spices for a burial. A hundred pounds is not a gift for an adversary. It's not even a gift for a friend. It is beyond extravagant. It is public display. It has no point, except perhaps Nicodemus being born anew, being able to see God's abundance and grace, and the hope of the kingdom of God, and wanting to be a part of it. Maybe Nicodemus is beginning to see what it looks like to be born of the Spirit.

As we continue our journey through Lent, as we continue to discover who we are and to whom we belong, consider what it might look like to become an infant in the faith. To depend less on what we can achieve and more on what God can do through us. To be vulnerable, admitting weakness, or asking for forgiveness. To follow where God leads, even if it's not where we want to go. To let yourself be loved and held by the one who so loved the world that he came among us to give us life.

Amen.