

The Courage to Question
John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He 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.’ 3Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’* 4Nicodemus 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?’ 5Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.* 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You* must be born from above.”* 8The 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.’ 9Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ 10Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 ‘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. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.* 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* 16 ‘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. 17 ‘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.

Have you ever thought about what you'd ask Jesus if you had him standing right here with us? Some friends of mine have had lists since high school of things they'd like explanations of or a little better elucidation of this or that passage. Nicodemus is our character for today, and he has the opportunity and he takes it. He has some questions and so he takes the present opportunity to get a few things straight.

Nicodemus, however, isn't just your average Jew. He is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. I'm not sure if you have seen *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but I happen to love it. In *Jesus Christ Superstar* you get an image of the leading rulers standing above watching as things happen down below. They get together with the religious leadership and end up going after Jesus. If that's an image you have, then understand that Nicodemus was one of those standing above. He is supposed to be one of the ones people come to for answers not the one who is so full of questions. Not only was he supposed to know, he also was with the group that was rallying the opposition to Jesus – not seeking answers from him. I was watching a series put out by the Yale Divinity School, and the scholars compared Nicodemus to the Dean of Yale Divinity, and said this experience is much like the Dean sneaking over to the Mormon Church, being convinced of a different and more complete truth and then coming back to share that with the faculty. It wouldn't just be increased knowledge and understanding that was at stake, his job, his security, his place in society would all be ruined by this midnight conversation. And, apparently, Nicodemus is convinced. We only hear about him three times and only in John's Gospel. Here he appears as a questioning Pharisee, then in Chapter 7, he reappears after there's been some controversy about Jesus and they are calling for his arrest. Nicodemus defends Jesus and advocates a fair trial. Then, we hear about him tending to the body of Jesus after the crucifixion along with Joseph of Arimathea.

SO, Nicodemus gets the courage to find Jesus, and the first thing he does is to call Jesus Rabbi and affirm his belief that Jesus has been sent by God. The reasoning behind that judgment was all the signs and wonders. Once Jesus answers, things get a little more murky. Jesus' comment is that no one can see the Kingdom of God except by being born from above, which is also interpreted as being "born again." Now, was Jesus affirming Nicodemus that he HAD seen the Kingdom of God? Was he implying that Nicodemus did NOT have such vision? Apparently, it wasn't so clear to Nicodemus either because, he had to ask a follow-up question – what are you talking about? How can anyone be born after growing old? Then, Jesus says in order to ENTER the Kingdom of God, you must be born of water and the Spirit – so we get a hint of baptism and the spiritual renewal that is necessary.

This doesn't denote a theology of once saved always saved, but seems to be re-orientation of one's personhood, not towards the flesh but towards the spirit. Being oriented on the heavenly and not on the worldly might mean that you change direction, like the wind.

Nicodemus, still not quite understanding Jesus, asks again. How can this be? To which Jesus seems a little exasperated! What do you mean, you don't understand!? You're a teacher and yet here you are clueless?!

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, and the people were healed, so too will the Son of Man be lifted up – and the people will be healed and welcomed into eternal life. Possibly the most well-known scripture is spoken either by Jesus or by the narrator in John 3:16 -For God so loved the world....

Now, our series is on water in the wilderness because the people whose stories we witness the next few weeks seem to be seeking Jesus out to feed something within themselves. Nicodemus was searching. He was yearning for truth. He needed some answers. I'm not sure that he didn't walk away from this encounter more befuddled than he was to start out. But, I think Nicodemus was lost in a wilderness of uncertainty, or perhaps more specifically, he was living with a superficial certainty, that he has assumed, but never stopped to really examine. And, so he goes to Jesus, searching for answers. The very fact that he went to Jesus and began with his own statement of belief, to me, denotes a boldness – a courage.

Have you ever found yourself in the middle of life looking around not sure of what you believe at all. The things that you've always assumed were true just don't seem to hold much water? I've been there. I wonder how many of us, when faced with that reality have gone looking for answers or how many of us have been too embarrassed, ashamed, or afraid of looking like a fool to even admit it to ourselves that we're lost. Last week, we considered the roles of temptation, sin, confession, and forgiveness in our spiritual walk. Today, I want you to consider the place of honesty and questioning. I believe that it takes great courage to be able to question our faith, to ask God why things are the way they are and then be willing to ask the follow-up questions.

The answers Jesus gave are worth our wrestling too. To be born from above. To be born by water and the spirit – what does all this even mean? We, like Nicodemus, understand that surely it doesn't mean that we are to reenter our mother's womb. Ick. So, what is this new birth? I said it before and I will say it again, I understand this to mean a re-orientation. We are oriented towards success, towards achievement, towards doing well in life, and what Jesus is calling us to is to think beyond the fleshiness of ourselves. We are more than skin and bones.

This last Friday, I had the honor of attending a funeral with Adrian and Katie. The church in Oak

Ridge, TN was absolutely packed. Deacon Milan, a dear friend of our family and of so many others lived his life oriented on things eternal. We heard story after story of his children, of fellow churchmembers, and of co-workers, who spoke of him first and foremost as a man of God who always had time for others. He took this past week off of work because his two daughters were coming home from college and his boss recalled the conversation, "if my daughters want to spend the week with their mother and me, then I need to be there." Brother Milan was successful in his work, but as stories were shared, he was never too busy or too important to stop and look someone in the eye and see how they were doing. His daughter laughed and said that he knew the lifestory of the grocery store clerk before he finished checking out.

Was David Milan a man who was born again? Born of water and the spirit? I would say absolutely. Of course, in the Baptist Church where he attended, they would tell you the date he was baptized as the date when he was born again, but I would suggest that every day Brother Milan made a choice to be oriented to the eternal.

Let us learn from Nicodemus and from our friend. It's okay to have questions. In fact, I think it's one of the most important steps in faith. But, we need to hear the answer of Jesus, which is a call to a new way of being. May our ears be open to hear the answers. Amen.