

Second Sunday in Lent, March 5, 2023
“Questions in the Night” (John 3:1-17)

Making assumptions about other people seems to be something that comes easily for us. I know that, over the years, people have been making assumptions about me. There have been lots of times when, wearing my clerical collar, people have addressed me as *Father*, making the assumption that I am a priest. Or when wearing a shirt and tie in a store, I’ve had other shoppers come to me for assistance. Because of the way I was dressed, they assumed I was an employee.

Of course, I’ve made assumptions about others, as well. I once assumed that a man with a beard and pony tail, wearing a sleeveless, black leather vest, and riding a motorcycle was a man who lacked religious conviction, only to discover, upon entering into conversation with him, that he was a very devout and compassionate Christian.

Yes, we often make assumptions based on what we think we know. What we have learned or experienced in the past forms a lens through which we see things in the present. And, often times, what we think we know is way off mark. This is especially true in conversations. Previous knowledge we’ve gained is used to interpret what we hear. Take my sermons for example. You all listen to the same message, but what each of you hears is often different from what everyone else hears. Your experience – and mine – dictates what is heard. But sometimes, this leads to misunderstanding.

In our text for today, Nicodemus makes assumptions based on his experience and, as a result, misunderstands what Jesus is trying to convey. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. Because we’re familiar with the stories of the gospels and know that Jesus was often at odds with the Pharisees, many of us already have a preconceived idea of Nicodemus and his motives. Although they sometimes missed the mark, the Pharisees of Jesus’ time were very devout and sincere. They tried the best way they could – the best way they knew how – to honor God and to be faithful to their religion. Nicodemus would have been considered a scholar. He knew the law forward and backward, and often taught in the synagogue. He was a very respected figure in the Jewish community.

John tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Now this might suggest secretiveness to us and make us immediately suspicious. After all, our experience tells us (and perhaps our moms did, too) that nothing good happens after dark. Of course, there could be a couple of good reasons for this. Already, Jesus had gotten himself a reputation as a healer and a man of God. Nicodemus – and all the Pharisees – recognized how dangerous his teachings could be. But Nicodemus had also heard of the wonders Jesus had performed. He was, no doubt, curious about Jesus, but didn’t want his colleagues to know that he had anything to do with Jesus. So, he went under the cover of darkness.

Or maybe he knew that because of Jesus’ popularity, he was constantly surrounded by crowds of people. If Nicodemus waited until after dark when Jesus was alone, he might have been better able to approach Jesus and have an uninterrupted conversation with him.

Or maybe the nighttime setting was crafted by John to be symbolic. Throughout his gospel, darkness is a symbol of unbelief. John may be setting the stage here to show us later how Nicodemus has changed.

No matter the reason for the nighttime meeting, the important thing is that Nicodemus came. And he approached Jesus on the basis of what he thought he already knew: *We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, because you couldn't do all these signs apart from the presence of God.* When he says, *we know*, he's most likely referring to himself and the other Pharisees. But what do they really know? Jesus is about to show him that it is less that he thinks.

Jesus responds to his statement with something that seems completely unrelated to what Nicodemus just said: *No one can see (or know) the kingdom of God without being born again.* The Greek word for *again* has multiple meanings. It can mean *anew, from the beginning*. It can mean *once more, a second time*. It can mean *from above, from God*. What Jesus means here is the latter. To be born from above is to undergo such a radical change that it is like a new birth, something happening to the soul, which can only be described as being born all over again, something that comes only from the grace and power of God.

But this way of thinking is outside the experience of this Jewish leader who is concerned only about the strict keeping of the law in order to find favor with a judging God. So, he misunderstands what Jesus is saying. He interprets Jesus' words more literally. He thinks Jesus is speaking of a physical birth. *How can an old man enter a second time into the womb and be born again?*

Perhaps Jesus chuckles to himself at this question, but then tries to clarify what he means. *To enter the kingdom of God, you must be born of water and the spirit.* What Jesus means is that one must have a physical birth – the one Nicodemus is thinking of – and a spiritual birth. The spiritual birth is a new beginning that comes from God above and, by his Holy Spirit. That's why Jesus tells him that he must be born again.

But this is still a little hard for Nicodemus to take in. *How can this be?* You see, Nicodemus has grown up thinking that he had to earn forgiveness. And now, he is a religious expert. He knows all the legalistic requirements of what it means to be Jewish. He knows all 612 religious laws and probably even has them memorized. So, what Jesus is suggesting is almost unfathomable. He has to be born again? That is contradictory to everything he holds sacred. What about the law and the prophets?

It's at this point that Jesus chides him a little: *You mean to tell me that you are a teacher in the temple and you don't understand something as simple as this? Remember the story of the children of Israel in the wilderness? They sinned and the Lord allowed fiery serpents to bite them. But do you remember that the Almighty also provided a way for them to be saved from the fiery serpents? He told Moses to put a bronze serpent on a pole and lift it up. All the people had to do was look at the serpent and they would be healed. You see, God is doing the same thing here. The Son of Man will be lifted up so that people can look to him and be saved.*

Then Jesus gives him the most precious promise in all of scripture – what Martin Luther called *the gospel in miniature: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. You see, the Almighty doesn't want to condemn the world; he wants to save it.*

I can imagine Nicodemus shaking his head and fading away into the darkness. He just can't make it all compute. It turns out that what he thought he knew about God was nothing close to what Jesus had just told him. However, at the end of John's gospel, we see Nicodemus again. But this time he comes to Jesus in the light. On the day of the crucifixion, Nicodemus and another Jewish friend, named Joseph, bring the spices to anoint Jesus' body for burial. His transformation has taken place and he expresses his love in a powerful way.

I think many of us are a lot like the Nicodemus at the beginning of John's gospel. We've grown up in and around the church. Our parents had us baptized and brought us to Sunday School. We memorized the catechism and the creeds, and were confirmed in the church. If anyone knows about Jesus, we do. But just knowing *about* Jesus doesn't make our lives richer and more meaningful. We have to *know* Jesus – personally – as we know a good friend. We have to stop living our parents' faith and start living our own. The gospel has to become real for *us* or we're merely giving lip service to God. That's why Jesus says we have to be born again.

But there's more, we might say. We try to follow the Ten Commandments and lead a good life. We join the congregation in worship every Sunday and support the church's ministries with our gifts. We have even taught Sunday School, worked with the youth, sang in the choir, and served on the Council. We have done – and are doing – all the right things. Surely, God must be pleased with us.

But the truth is that all these things are meaningless if they do not come from the heart. In the 29th chapter of Isaiah, God addresses a disobedient people who claim to belong to God, but are merely going through the motions: *They honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me; and their worship of me is by rote.*

Jesus is telling Nicodemus – and us – that eternal life is a gift from God above. It's not what we know up here (*head*) or what we do. It's about what we experience here (*heart*). Through the Holy Spirit, God gives us a clean start. God's desire – all the way back to the Old Testament – has always been to save us. That is why he sent Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. All we need to do is to accept this gift, through faith, even though that is difficult for those of us who are works-oriented. We only need to open our hearts to God, ask Christ to be a part of our lives, and allow the Holy Spirit to do his work in bringing us to new birth.

Then, as newborn children of God, the kingdom is ours as a gift. And when we receive this gift, that's when we stop doing works to win God's approval and start doing them to glorify God because we *have* his approval. That's the transformation God wants to see in us. That's what it means to be born again. And that's when our lives are changed forever into something more than we ever imagined. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.