

Nicodemus
March 1, 2026 HMC
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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 unless God is with that person." 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 the 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.

Introduction

Today is the anniversary of the founding of the Moravian Church in Kunvald in Bohemia 569 years ago. That's over 200 years before the American revolution. To tell the truth, we don't know exactly on what day the Moravian Church was founded because it was an illegal church that kept its origin secret, but for centuries March 1 has served as a good date to observe the anniversary. Contrary to popular belief our church was not founded by John Hus, but by some of his followers forty years after Hus's death. It was a man named Gregory who gathered a small community of believers to form a voluntary society dedicated to following Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as closely as possible. They didn't call their organization a church; it was

simply the Unity of the Brethren. They believed that the Catholic Church had been corrupted by wealth and political power, and they chose to withdraw from the state church and build a new, voluntary community based on the New Testament.

We still follow some of their teachings and practices today. Our ancestors were forced to worship in secret because of religious persecution, but their witness endured violence and oppression. We, like they, live in perilous times. And we, like they, continue to bear witness that Christ is the prince of peace and Lord of our lives.

Pharisees

Our gospel lesson for today was not chosen with the anniversary of the Moravian Church in mind, but it is appropriate for this occasion because it is about someone who comes to speak with Jesus in secret because he is afraid of the religious authorities. Nicodemus was a member of the Pharisee party in Jerusalem. The Pharisees were not bad people, although many people get that impression from reading the New Testament.

Actually, the Pharisees were the most pious Jews in Jesus' time. They were concerned about following the laws of Moses in the Bible and they sought to be faithful to God. Pharisees spent a lot of time thinking about religion and talking about religion. Some of Jesus' opponents were Pharisees, but there were also Pharisees like Nicodemus who saw Jesus as a great teacher. When John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, it is telling us that he was very serious about his religion and sincerely wanted to do the right thing.

But the Pharisees in the time of Jesus were also a political party in Palestine. They were the opponents of the other political party, the Sadducees, who controlled the temple. Both parties had seats on the council that governed Jerusalem and Palestine under the Roman Empire and they often criticized each other. In other words, political politization masked as religious differences goes all the way back to the first century. Our gospel lesson for today takes place in a time of intense political tension about religious laws.

Nicodemus at night.

Nicodemus is not mentioned in the other gospels, but he appears at the beginning of the gospel of John and at the end. Nicodemus is the first person who comes to Jesus without being called by Jesus, and at the end of the gospel Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus. He bought the spices for Jesus' burial. That shows us that Nicodemus was a wealthy and powerful man in Jerusalem, but it appears that Nicodemus joined the church after Jesus' resurrection since he must have told others his story of meeting Jesus.

The Gospel of *John* tells us that Nicodemus came to see Jesus in the dark of night. It is an important detail. He came at night because he feared what his enemies and

even some of his friends would do if they knew he was talking to Jesus. He told Jesus that he came to him because he knew that Jesus was a teacher sent by God, which would put him at odds with his friends. It appears that Nicodemus was afraid that people would find out that he was sympathetic to Jesus or that he was struggling with his faith even though he was a Pharisee.

The conversation with Jesus was probably much longer than the seventeen verses we have in the Bible. We do not know what secret desires and fears Nicodemus shared with Jesus, just as we do not truly know why our brothers and sisters are with us here today. I do not know what is in your heart; what pain and griefs you bear. I do not know your secret longings, but I do know that something brought you to this church. Something in your heart or in your head urged you to come here today and hear the good news of the gospel. You may have come from habit or to obey your parents, but I suspect that deep down you are here because you need to be here.

Nicodemus is like each of us. Like Nicodemus we long for release from the malaise that afflicts our souls. We long to be released from the fear of death. We long for life eternal. Nicodemus came to Jesus, opened his heart to Jesus, and asked Jesus to teach him. Even though Nicodemus was a teacher himself, he had questions.

I expect that Nicodemus assumed Jesus would do like all the other rabbis: he would open the Bible and start arguing with him about biblical interpretation. I bet Nicodemus was ready to debate Jesus, but Jesus said something that caught Nicodemus by surprise. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Jesus’s surprising answer: born again

The Greek word John uses here is *anōthen*, and I’m only mentioning that because it has a double meaning. Translators must decide whether to render this phrase as “born again” or “born from above.” This double meaning does not occur in Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin, or English, but it is important in this passage because Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus, thinking he meant that he needed to be born again. Nicodemus took Jesus literally, and he told Jesus that it is impossible for an adult to go back into the womb and be born a second time. Jesus corrected him and told him that he wasn’t talking about a literal, physical rebirth. He is talking about a spiritual rebirth.

No one can see the kingdom without being born from above, without spiritual rebirth. Jesus told Nicodemus that the kingdom of God is not about having the correct readings of Scripture or following the right religious traditions; it’s not just saying the right words or having the right political views. Jesus told Nicodemus that he has been trying to follow God in the wrong way. He needs a new perspective on God, the world, and himself.

Jesus said that until we are born from above, the kingdom of God remains invisible to us. Until we are born from above, all we can see are the things that make us anxious and the worries that weigh us down. Until we are born from above, we are like Nicodemus in the middle of the night, blinded by our cares and our fears, standing in the dark alone, hoping that someone can teach us a better way.

Some translations of this passage say: “you must be born again.” That phrase has become a catch word in American Christianity. So many people describe themselves as “born again Christians” that political scientists use that term when they study voting patterns. Political scientists often think that people who say they are “born again” all vote for the same party in elections, but when Jesus talks about being born again, he wasn’t talking about politics. He was talking about the kingdom of God.

Plural

One fascinating little twist in this story that gets lost in translation is that when Jesus says “you must be born anew” he uses the plural. Y’all got to be born anew, Jesus said. Jesus wasn’t just talking to Nicodemus, he was talking everyone who is seeking the kingdom of God. We must be given new, divine life to enter into the realm of God’s rule, into God’s kingdom. We need new eyes to see the world as God sees the world, new ears to hear the cries of our neighbors, a new heart filled with compassion.

Being born from above means that we learn to approach life from God’s perspective. We let God transform our lives. Being born from above might happen suddenly or it might be a slow process of transformation. But one thing is for sure, it is not a once and done deal. Being born from above is life-long process. Each day we can be reborn and renewed by the Spirit of God. This is the meaning of eternal life. It’s not just everlasting; is the kind of life revealed in Jesus Christ who burst the grave and threw down the gates of hell. That is kind of life that we can have today.

John 3:16

This is the setting for the famous verse, John 3:16, which is one of the favorite verses for many people. “For God so loved the world, he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life.” We see John 3:16 spray painted as graffiti on bridges and overpasses. We even see it on signs at athletic events. Today we shout it out on the airwaves and from rooftops and social media, but it was first spoken in darkness.

Since ancient Greek did not have quotation marks, it is not clear if it is Jesus or the author of the gospel who said “for God so loved the world.” That verse helps to clarify what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus. Jesus was saying: “You, Nicodemus, who follow the law and condemn those who do not follow it, must be born from above. You who want to enter heaven, while trying to keep others out, must be born again. You must taste the life that only the Holy Spirit can give. Your world needs to be

turned upside down so that you will see the world as God sees it. If you want to truly live, to have eternal life, unending, ever growing life, then believe in the source of life. Believe in me.” Not just you, Nicodemus, but all y’all who seek salvation.

“For God so loved the world....” Let us pause and think on these words. For God so loved the world.... John 3:16 is not about trying to scare people into the church; it is cry of God’s love for his world, for his creation. Those who are born of the Spirit, see the world as God sees it, share in God’s passionate love. Eternal life means that we share this life and love with the world, just as God gave his only son for the world.

Too often people use the Bible to condemn the world. Too often people retreat from the world and hide with their Bibles. This world may have become darkened by sin and evil, but it is still God’s world; it is still God’s good creation; it is still the world that God loves enough to suffer to redeem it. For God so loved the world, John says, we should not turn our backs on the world.

John says that the spirit of God is like the wind that cannot be seen with our eyes or controlled by the human will. You know the wind only by its effects, by the ways dead leaves are blown away. We cannot see the spirit of God, but we can see the effects. We can see the change in people’s lives when they are reborn. We can see what happens when they turn away from the pleasures of the night and live according to the light. We can see what happens when Christ’s love is shared in this city. Children are safe and happy in schools, workers are treated with dignity, the sick receive care, and no one is left alone in the darkness.

Conclusion

Our Gospel lesson ends with John 3:17: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” I think this verse needs to be quoted more often. The Good News of Jesus is not about condemnation and damnation; it is about life and salvation. Those who are born from above are called to live in the world as the harbingers of hope and messengers of peace. You don’t need to hear someone’s conversation story to know whether they have been born from above. It will shine from their eyes and be evident in their actions. Wherever there are Christians, the world should be a more peaceful and safer place.

Like our spiritual ancestors in Kunvald centuries ago, we have come together to hear Jesus’ words of life and to enter the kingdom of God on earth. May we all let God remake our lives according to the model of Christ. May we surrender ourselves in faith. May we be born from above so we can look on this dark and troubled world with the love of God filling our hearts. For God so loved the world, he sent his only

son. And God's son sends us. Let us go with our Lord into the world and demonstrate his love for people here in this place and this time.

Announce bymn 608 O Jesus my Lord

Prayers of intercession in time of crisis, 117

Announce Hymn 474 Lord Divine

Benediction:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen