

John 3:1-17: **John 3:17**

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Study for Nicodemus Visiting Jesus, Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1899

Some of today's gospel verses may sound incredibly familiar, and there's a lot going on in this story. So we're going to do what a friend of mine calls an "illuminated reading." I'll read a bit of the text out loud, then I'll stop and say something about it. We'll go back and forth that way several times.

Through the gospel may God's Spirit meet each of us where we need to be touched. So from the Gospel of John, chapter 3 (CEB), let's start by hearing just verse 1.

¹ There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader.

Just before this Jesus confronted religious leaders in the famous "cleansing of the temple" scene. Now one of the leaders, a member of the urban elite, seeks Jesus out for a conversation.

John's gospel is full of wordplay. While Nicodemus is Jewish, his name is Greek and it means "victory of the people," or maybe "victory over the people." As a religious and political leader, Nicodemus might be riding that fence between leading his people and cozying up to the Greco-Roman culture that dominated the empire. Let's hear verse 2:

² He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.”

One tradition says that Nicodemus visited Jesus at night because he didn’t want to be seen. Maybe. But the gospel writer already has introduced Jesus as the light of the world, so it’s symbolic that Nicodemus starts out in the darkness when he first comes to Jesus.

Night is also a time for considering mystery because then you can see the farthest of all: just look up at the stars. It’s a setting for a heavenly conversation.

In this scene Nicodemus opens dialog with Jesus respectfully, acknowledging that God must be with him. Nicodemus is more right than he realizes. But Jesus ignores the flattery and takes the conversation elsewhere. So let’s read verses 3 and 4:

³ Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it’s not possible to see God’s kingdom.”

⁴ Nicodemus asked, “How is it possible for an adult to be born? It’s impossible to enter the mother’s womb for a second time and be born, isn’t it?”

It’s such a preposterous image, but let’s give Nicodemus props for at least considering the possibility: “It’s impossible...isn’t it?”

In the Common English Bible, which I’m reading from, Jesus says “unless someone is born anew....” That’s probably the meaning Jesus *intends*: an understanding of being reborn, remade. But what Nicodemus *hears* is the more literal “unless someone is born again” which befuddles him. The Greek words can mean both things: born again or born anew. Or “born from above” as some translations put it.

You’ve probably heard the words “born again” many times, because some English Bible translations use those words here. And some followers of Jesus have invented various tests for identifying whether someone is “born again” or not. During college someone told my wife Aimee that if she had never spoken in tongues, she wasn’t really born again.

But Jesus refuses to reduce his good news to some formula. I think he’s having fun in this conversation, giving Nicodemus some divine mysteries to chew on, like getting born in spiritual terms. Let’s hear verses 5 through 8:

⁵ Jesus answered, “I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom.⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Don’t be surprised that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ ⁸ God’s Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going. It’s the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Jesus begins to set up human choices here. In the verses beyond what we’re reading today, Jesus talks about the choices we are given when God’s light comes into the world. We can try to hide our dark deeds and impulses, or we can be drawn to the light and let it illuminate us, remake us. Our actions reveal our orientation to the light.

That includes political actions. Right now our state legislators are proposing and debating new laws that would attempt to shroud transgender people in darkness, pretend they are not among us.

Kentucky House Bill 470 would, among other things, make it illegal for doctors to offer gender-affirming treatment for transgender youth under 18 years old. Kentucky Senate Bill 150 would, among other things, prevent school staff from using a student's preferred name or pronouns if a parent didn't want them used.

Also this week a colleague sent me a local news video highlighting students at Noe Middle School demonstrating in protest of these proposed laws. Some of the students in the video are our own beloved church members, doing their part to shine a light on behalf of transgender youth. Thank God for their strong witness. Because whenever we stand with vulnerable and misunderstood persons, we affirm that they equally reflect the image and beauty and mystery of God. Sometimes being born anew requires listening closely to God's Spirit blowing through our young people.

Let's hear verses 9 through 13:

⁹ Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?"

¹⁰ Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? ¹¹ I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One."

Are you sure you're a teacher? Jesus asks. You seem a little slow... Remember that especially in the Gospel of John, more than in the other gospels, Jesus has an otherworldly presence. He speaks as one fully acquainted with God, and in this case he implies that when his earthly life began he came directly from God. Nicodemus, an expert in God's law and history, can't seem to make sense of this new information. God? A human? With us?? Let's read verses 14 and 15:

¹⁴ "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life."

Jesus refers to a disturbing incident in the book of Numbers where the people of Israel rebel against God and are bitten by venomous snakes. God tells Moses to make a bronze image of a snake and lift it up — and everyone who looked at it would be healed. The symbolic connection here is that Jesus is the one who will be lifted up for all to see, and *he* brings healing and life and hope. Which brings us to the most famous verse: John 3:16:

¹⁶ God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.

It was the first Bible verse I ever learned. I grew up in a community where memorizing parts of the Bible was a spiritual practice. And this particular verse seemed to be lifted up as a summary of the whole gospel. But I've found that *which* words of John 3:16 we emphasize makes a huge difference.

Focusing on "everyone who believes in him won't perish" puts pressure on human beings to believe rightly. So I grew up fearing that people who didn't believe in Jesus were going to be condemned by God. Of course I wondered sometimes if *I* would be in that condemned group. Because my belief varies over time and sometimes it can feel halfhearted and it can be intellectually confusing. Yet *also* in my experience, belief can be lifegiving, lifesaving, liberating, a joyful response to God's love. It's complicated.

I resonate with Nicodemus who also seems to wrestle with the complexity of faith. After this conversation he becomes a recurring character in the Gospel of John. Following another confrontation between Jesus and religious leaders, Nicodemus will say to his fellow Pharisees, “Doesn’t our law require us to hear someone out before judging him?” (7:51) And after Jesus’ crucifixion, Nicodemus will bring 75 pounds of aloe and myrrh to anoint and honor Jesus’ battered body. The leader who first came to Jesus at night becomes someone whose actions reflect divine light and divine tenderness. Encountering God in Jesus changes Nicodemus.

So I find it helpful emphasize the *beginning* of John 3:16: “God so loved the world....” The good news is that *God* — creator, eternal mystery, beginning and end of everything — God so *loved* — not tolerated or evaluated or disciplined — God so loved *the world* — not just righteous people or certain ethnic groups or even just human beings but God so loved *the cosmos, everything that exists*. Out of *that* love God’s Word became flesh and moved into our neighborhood.

A neighborhood that can be dangerous. On Friday Louisvillians experienced extreme winds and rumors of tornadoes. Lots of trees and electric lines got torn down. Some of our church members and staff still don’t have their power restored.

And the storm felt like eerie timing to me. Because three years ago this week, full-blown tornadoes tore through middle Tennessee, where we used to live. Those violent storms obliterated large swaths of Nashville and surrounding areas. That week I checked in with my friend Andrew, a pastor in Cookeville, TN. He said that in their town, “everybody knows somebody who lost everything” in that tornado. And the five kids in his middle school youth group lost one of their close friends from school. She was 13 years old. Her brother found her, already dead, and he held her until the storm passed.

That brother lived out love beyond death.

Nicodemus lived out love beyond death when he brought the balm for Jesus’ burial.

And God takes love beyond death a step further. God lives out love beyond Jesus’ death by working resurrection and by inviting the whole world to share in that deathless bounty. Which brings us to John 3:17. Let’s hear that final verse:

¹⁷ God didn’t send God’s Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

There’s our solid landing pad. If you remember no other words from today’s sermon, hang on to that verse. If you ever memorized John 3:16, please add John 3:17 to your memory, and keep them together from now on.

Jesus entered into our world — with its political posturing and its contagious viruses and its unexpected whirlwinds and its grief-filled weeks — and he came with no plan to condemn this old world. Instead, Jesus arrived bearing God’s unbounded love, on a mission to save from sin and evil, from death and despair every speck of this world — this cosmos — which God *so loves*.

In the name of God who is Love,
God the Human One,
and God the Holy Spirit.