

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
March 8, 2020

The Second Sunday of Lent: John 3:1-17

Nicodemus and Christ

I thought we might begin our sermon today with a little Bible trivia. Don't worry! You won't have to raise your hand or shout out an answer and we aren't going to divide into teams and see who wins. In fact, Bible trivia with a bunch of Episcopalians is probably a very bad idea! Here is your question and tell me later if you knew the answer: Where else does Nicodemus show up in the Bible?

This passage from John's third chapter has fascinated me for a long time. I'm not sure exactly why but I think it has to do with the fact that John 3:16 must be the most quoted Bible verse of all time. We find it on bumper stickers and tattoos, homemade signs on the side of the road and on church marquees, posters at football games, and, of course, on many a billboard lining the interstates of the South.

When I was in college, I took a class on the history of biblical interpretation that sought to examine how Christians have interpreted the Bible differently over the centuries. The big paper in that class was to choose a pericope, a story, from the Gospel of John and to examine what the Saints have said about it from the earliest days of the Church up into modern times. Don't you know that I picked today's Gospel lesson for that assignment? I was surprised, perhaps like you are this morning, that John 3:16 actually has a context. It is not a free-floating Bible verse wandering the universe! It takes place in the middle of a fascinating,

deeply theological conversation between a Pharisee named Nicodemus and Jesus the Christ.

Even though in this chapter we find the all-time favorite verse of Evangelical Christianity, we also find so much more. The conversation takes place under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus doesn't confess Jesus as the Christ, but seems to want an inside dialogue with a fellow teacher of Israel. Jesus responds playfully to this serious teacher by talking about being born again in some way. Nicodemus -- this expert in all things religion -- has no idea who he's talking with!

If we're going to look at John, chapter 3, then the first thing we have to do is claim John 3:16 for what it is. We need to put it back into context. What I mean, first of all, is that we might acknowledge that a lot of people have managed to use this verse as a means for making themselves feel special while pretending it was about sharing the Gospel. We can reject that kind of judgmentalism which pretends to care about others but really is saying, "I'm right and you're wrong! I know the truth and you're lost!" Because here's the thing about that kind of thinking -- it's sort of like Nicodemus' view of Jesus -- it not that it is wrong, it's just that it's incomplete. It is only half the picture.

It seems to me in this third chapter of John, that Jesus is going out of his way to make it clear that he has come, not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. He is on a mission of salvation. As one of our Morning Prayer collects says, Jesus stretched out his arms of love on the cross that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace. And in John's Gospel especially, life in Christ is about receiving that joy that only comes from God. Jesus prays

that his joy might be in us and that our joy might be complete. In John's Gospel, Jesus came that we might have life and might have it more abundantly. That's the kind of Good News that we can share with others!

I reckon it's hard to not sound judgmental from a billboard. There's only so much nuance in evangelism at 70 miles per hour. But I think we can do better. Doing better is not, however, turning our backs on sharing the Good News of God in Christ all together. As Episcopalians, we are uniquely positioned to proclaim the Gospel -- to invite others to life in Christ -- in thoughtful and genuine ways. What if we knew of a way of living that was grounded in the past, grounded in something ancient, and yet open to what God is doing here and now? What if we could invite people to share in a worshipping community that did not require agreement on every issue of the day because of our common prayer, because the words of our liturgy were enough to bring us together and to make us one? What if you knew of a parish community that had survived the test of time and whose life in the present was characterized by people caring for one another through thick and thin, celebrating life's joys and grieving life's sorrows together? A parish with beautiful worship, a heart for those in need, and an ability to learn and fellowship with each other? My friends, that's Anglicanism as I know it, that's the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement, that is life at St. John in the Wilderness, and that is Good News worth sharing!

What Nicodemus offers us is the reminder that we all walk towards God in different ways but we are traveling this road toward salvation together. This Pharisee, this expert in religion, knew something of God just like we do. He had surely encountered God before and had even

shared God with others. Yet he encountered God in a completely new way when he snuck around one night hoping to run into this Jesus. The doctors of the Church are sure that Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about baptism. “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says, “no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (John 3:5). As an 11th century bishop named Theophylact said, “The birth which comes through baptism, enlightens the soul, and enables one to *see the Kingdom of God*, which means to understand the Only-begotten Son.”

Even as baptized people, this story reminds us that we are called to conversion after conversion. God is ever in the process of making us whole. That process began in baptism and, as ones belonging to God, we work daily towards sanctification, towards being made holy -- not because we are more important than anyone else, not because we are exceptional, but because we have had a taste of this abundant life in Christ and we want more of it. And we want others to know just how good life in Christ really is.

In opening, I asked you a little bit of biblical trivia about Nicodemus. Specifically, where else does Nicodemus show up in the Bible? Are you ready for the answer? And you can let me know if you got it right. Nicodemus is only found in John’s Gospel. He shows up in this story and in two other places later in the Gospel. In John, chapter 7, Jesus is teaching in Jerusalem, saying that God sent him and calling out religious leaders for relishing the privilege of their position. These leaders send the Temple guard to arrest him but the guards are amazed at Jesus’ teaching; the Pharisees are furious. Nicodemus stands up to his peers in defense of Jesus.

There is one final place where Nicodemus shows up. The first time it was in darkness, as our Gospel reading told. Secondly, Nicodemus risked something in defense of Jesus among his fellow Pharisees. The last time we find him the Scriptures, it's at the very end of the story. Jesus has been crucified and has died. In John 19, it says that Joseph of Arimathea was accompanied by Nicodemus, who first came to Jesus by night. He and Nicodemus asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. They brought costly perfume and oils and prepared Jesus' body for burial according to their customs; they laid him in an empty tomb. This is not the work simply of a student; this is the work of a disciple.

It would seem that this conversation that Nicodemus had with Jesus -- the one that we heard today -- well, it changed the course of his life. Those saving words of Jesus were not lofty theological teachings. They were not points up for debate, nor words you just throw up onto a billboard. They were an invitation to a relationship with God incarnate, who came with the purpose of letting you and me and everyone know just how much God does love the world. It would seem that Nicodemus accepted this invitation and that through his journey of conversion, we find inspiration for our journey, too.