

3.1.26 Sermon on John 3:1-17

Over the years, both Darick and I have had a number of individuals reach out to us asking questions about the Bible, about faith, about struggles they have. In some of these instances, it has started with an anonymous request – a post of Facebook looking for someone who can help, or a request through a person seeking guidance on behalf of one of their friends or loved ones. In those instances, it usually becomes pretty clear early on in the conversation that the individual seeking guidance is doing so on the down low because they don't want to experience condemnation from their family or faith community. There is genuine desire to learn and grow, but they feel like they need the "cover of night," as it were.

In the same way, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, and that detail alone tells us more than we might realize at first. Nicodemus was a person who has spent his entire life living in the light of religious certainty, someone who has devoted himself to understanding God, studying Scripture, and helping guide his community in faithfulness.

John tells us that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and that matters, because the Pharisees were not the bad guys, they were the faithful guys. They were deeply respected teachers and reformers, people who believed that faithfulness to God required intentional obedience and careful attention, especially in a world shaped by Roman occupation, where their identity, their safety, and their future as a people often felt uncertain and fragile.

Nicodemus is also a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, which meant he was one of the leaders responsible for preserving the religious life of the people and helping them navigate the complicated and often dangerous realities of living under empire.

In other words, Nicodemus is someone with religious credentials. He is someone who has spent his entire life learning how to preserve what matters, how to protect the future, how to make sure nothing essential is lost.

And here we are in this moment where Nicodemus, despite having all the religious credentials, realizes that he has questions. He wants to understand who Jesus is and how he fits into the framework he's operated within his whole life. And when Nicodemus comes to Jesus, he does not find the answers he is looking for. Instead, he only finds more questions. Nicodemus does not yet have the imagination to really see what God is doing. He has knowledge and certainty. He has categories for understanding how God works. But he does not yet have space in his mind or heart for what God is about to do.

When Nicodemus begins speaking, he speaks in the language he knows best, saying, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God," because Nicodemus is used to knowing and analyzing, used to drawing conclusions and placing things into

systems he can understand and manage. But Jesus does not invite Nicodemus into more certainty. Instead, Jesus invites him into mystery.

Jesus tells him that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, and Nicodemus immediately struggles, because everything in his life has been built on stability and continuity and careful categories, and Jesus is describing something that cannot be preserved or controlled, but only received. What Jesus is really telling Nicodemus is that the future God is creating cannot be secured through credentials or managed through effort, but must be entered through trust.

And that is unsettling, because Nicodemus has spent his entire life trying to secure the future. He has spent his life making sure faith survives. He has spent his life operating under a system with clear definitions. I can relate to Nicodemus in this moment, and maybe you can to. I often live under the guise of thinking that I am in control of my future. I mean, I am the kind of person who hates flying because I have absolutely zero control over what the plane is going to do and there is nothing I can do to change that. It is one situation in life where I cannot even convince myself that I have the illusion of control.

In this moment, in this conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus is hearing that God's future will not arrive through his ability to control it, but through his willingness to trust it. Jesus says, "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." In other words, God's future is not something we manage, it is something we enter. It is something we receive.

We have the same struggle as Nicodemus – his struggle is our struggle, because we live in a world that teaches us, in countless ways, that our safety depends on what we can control, that our future depends on what we can secure, that our well-being depends on how tightly we hold on to what we have. Fear is at the heart of this way. Fear teaches us to live closed-handed lives, and to protect ourselves. It teaches us to hoard what we have and that there may not be enough.

In this moment, Nicodemus is being asked to trust in a future he cannot control. He's being asked to let go of what he has held on to so tightly. Nicodemus is being asked to relinquish his fear, the same fear that led him to seek out Jesus in the middle of the night where no one would see him. Nicodemus is being called to a new kind of life – one that doesn't rest in the need to have certainties, but to receive the generosity of God's love and to trust that God's story will be held together not with rules or categories for living, but through love. But Nicodemus' fear makes generosity feel dangerous, because it requires trust in a future that he cannot fully control. Nicodemus is invited to step into a new reality driven by God's generosity, but he's not quite ready to do that. He hesitates in this moment, He is still afraid

of what that life could cost him, of the certainties and well-laid plans he would have to give up.

But here in Appalachia, I think we sometimes experience glimpses of another way of living. We know what mutual aid looks like. We know what it looks like when an elementary school has a fire and before the story has barely hit the news cycle, people are gathering up books and supplies and other things teachers lost in their classroom. We know what it looks like when a flood comes through a holler and people don't wait for permission or programs, but bring out the shovels and gloves and cleaning supplies to muck out a home. We know what it looks like when people immediately show up for dinner fundraisers to help pay for the legal and family needs of immigrants detained by ICE in our communities. We know what it looks like to see someone who is injured, ill, or grieving, and before they know it, their refrigerator is filled with casseroles, or their wallets with gift cards to order food. And the thing about those moments is that no one stops to calculate whether we can afford to be generous.

We give because we trust something deeper than scarcity, and we trust that when our own moment of need comes, we will not be alone. We trust that our future is bound up in one another. We trust that holding tightly to what we have is not what keeps a community alive, but it is opening up our hands. And that kind of generosity is not rooted in certainty. It is rooted in trust, and in the belief that the future will be held together not by fear, but by love.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born from above, Nicodemus hears it as a problem to solve rather than an invitation to receive, because Nicodemus has spent his entire life believing that faithfulness is something you achieve through effort, discipline, careful obedience, and through building a life strong enough and certain enough to withstand whatever the future might bring. And in fairness, who can blame him? There is something really appealing about a living life this way – with a clear-cut set of rules to live by, with a level of certainty, especially in times of chaos. As I attempt to take in the latest news cycle that includes the beginning of unilateral war that has already killed around 100 children in Iran, as I watch our current legislative session that continues to cause more harm to vulnerable people, as I look at the polarization all around us, I wish that I could inhabit Nicodemus' world where everything is easily categorized, and his understanding of how he should move through the world is so certain to him. In Nicodemus' world, it just "is the way it is," and he has found a way to just cling to faith, rather than to imagine what God might make possible.

And so Nicodemus asks the only question that makes sense to him: "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Nicodemus assumes that whatever Jesus is talking about

must still somehow depend on him. But Jesus is not talking about something Nicodemus can accomplish, he is talking about something Nicodemus can only receive.

The phrase Jesus uses, “born from above”, can also mean “born from the beginning” or “born anew,” and that ambiguity is intentional, because Jesus is describing something deeper than self-improvement, something deeper than becoming a slightly better version of yourself, something deeper even than learning new religious ideas. Jesus is describing a completely new way of existing. He is describing a life that is no longer rooted in fear, but in trust.

The life that Nicodemus has built, for all its faithfulness and sincerity, is still rooted in the assumption that the future depends on him, that security comes from managing well enough, preserving carefully enough, controlling faithfully enough. And Jesus is telling him that the life of God does not work that way.

To be born from above is to realize that our life is not something we secure, it is something we receive. It is to realize that our future is not something we control, but it is something God is already creating. It is to realize that faith is not about protecting ourselves from loss, but about trusting that nothing, not even loss, can separate us from the love of God. When Jesus says that this new birth comes from water and Spirit, he is describing something that happens not through human effort, but through God’s initiative, something that happens the same way wind happens, freely and mysteriously and beyond our control.

“The wind blows where it chooses,” Jesus says, “and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” In other words, this new birth is not something we manage, it is something that carries us.

And this is why being born from above is so deeply connected to generosity – because when our lives are rooted in fear, generosity feels like a threat. But when our lives are rooted in trust, generosity becomes possible because we no longer believe that everything depends on us and we begin to trust that your life is held by something larger than ourselves. To be born from above is to stop living as if scarcity is the deepest truth of the world and to start living as if love is. In the end, it is to live with open hands instead of closed ones and to allow God’s imagination to take root in our lives.

That is the future Jesus is inviting Nicodemus into. When Jesus says, “For God so loved the world,” he is not describing a system of control. He is describing a relationship of trust. At this point in the story, Nicodemus cannot yet see it clearly. He leaves this conversation confused, still standing at the edge of a future he does not yet understand. In his book, *The Sin of Certainty*, Peter Enns writes that when people prioritize intellectual conformity to a

specific “correct” set of beliefs over trusting God, their theology has become an idol. Nicodemus is still wrestling with this idol when he leaves Jesus that night.

But Nicodemus’ story does not end here. John’s Gospel tells us that later, after Jesus has been crucified, after hope itself seems to have been extinguished, after the disciples have fled in fear and uncertainty, Nicodemus shows up again, and this time, he does not come at night. This time, he steps forward publicly. He comes with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus’ body for burial, and John tells us that Nicodemus brings with him a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about seventy-five pounds. Seventy five pounds is an almost absurd amount. It is an extravagant amount, like the amount one would use to bury a king.

And in that moment, we see what trust looks like, because Nicodemus, who once lived by preserving and controlling, now lives by giving. He is no longer trying to secure the future. And instead he now has the imagination to trust in God’s future. He might not be able to see what it is, but he is not afraid to be generous because he trusts that God is not finished with the story. He trusts that each page will unfold and he is ready to participate without knowing where he is going.

Nicodemus’ generosity here flows from trust in God. Once, fear closed his hands, but now trust opens them. Nicodemus once had credentials but no imagination. But Jesus gave him imagination: imagination to believe that love was stronger than fear, that death was not the end of the story. He gave Nicodemus the imagination to live generously.

Jesus extends that same invitation to us, because the question is not whether God’s future is secure, the question is whether we trust it. Do we trust it enough to step out of the night, and into the future God is already creating? Amen.