

Calvary Baptist Church of Denver  
Sunday, March 20, 2011  
Joe Greemore preaching  
Text: John 3:1-17

“Say What”

[So, to Becky’s question, which she posed to our children...“Where you all born as children?” Well, where you born? More importantly, were you born twice? That seems to be the question with which Nicodemus in confronted when he meets Jesus late one night. Jesus tells him that he must be ‘born again’ in order to get into heaven. Nicodemus answers with, perhaps to paraphrase, “*Say what!?* How can that be...?”]

Today is Sunday, March 27, the third week of Advent. Today, we’ll be studying the life of a man called Barnabus. Right? Hardly. Last time I checked, today was March 20 and our text John 3. But how do you know that to be true? Your response just a minute ago may have been, “Say *WHAT*, Pastor Joe? You’ve been studying too much – time for a break. You’re off your rocker!”

Your response may not have differed much from that of Nicodemus who, upon hearing of Jesus talking about being born again had to scratch his head incredulously. The truth is a funny thing. Sometimes, we have it set in our mind that its one thing, where in reality it turns out to be quite another. Take Galileo for example. People of his day understood the Bible to teach that the sun and celestial bodies revolve around the earth. This is called the theory of a geo-centric universe. Copernicus, as he studied the celestial bodies, understood this to be quite otherwise. Galileo Galilei was audacious enough to pick up this work where Copernicus had left off and sought to show that our universe is helio-, or sun, -centric, that the celestial bodies actually revolve around the sun. We have made much progress since Galileo’s discovery that the earth, indeed, does revolve around the sun.

Today, we have N.A.S.A., the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. We have seen in the news, among other headlines, that N.A.S.A. recently retired the shuttle *Challenger*, which for years has been one of its most prolific space programs. Now, that is coming to a close. N.A.S.A. has shown in many other ways that the ways in

which we have thought about the universe may not, in fact, be the case. It has expanded our understanding of what reality really is.

Nicodemus is an interesting character. Passing through Kansas on I-70 just a few weeks ago, I passed to the south of a small, Reconstruction era town called Nicodemus, KS. Nicodemus was named for a man who gained his freedom and traveled to the abolitionist state, KS, along with a wave of others who were called “Exodusters”. These were people who left the south in search of free status in the north in the years following the Civil War.

What comes to mind when I say this phrase?

“After the President was assassinated, his vice president, Johnson, faced the dubious task of keeping the peace as well as putting a nation back together.”

Our first response could be, after JFK was assassinated, Lyndon B. Johnson faced the dubious task of keeping a nation at peace that was, in reality, at war abroad. I am actually referring to an earlier time in history when President Lincoln was assassinated. His successor, Andrew Johnson, faced the task of putting the nation back together. Thus a time began known as Presidential Reconstruction, or “the Reconstruction Era.” It was during this period that Nicodemus was born.

I also saw a movie recently that gave me another perspective on the name “Nicodemus,” *The Secret of Nimh*. The movie was made in 1982. Nicodemus, the rat, takes a central role in the movie. He appears sage-like, very wise, eyes glowing; he has long hair and walks around in long, flowing robes [not unlike, perhaps, a Pharisee, which the Nicodemus we read about today was].

As we take a closer look at today’s account, we notice a number of things. First, we see that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader among the Jews. This is what prompted Jesus to say, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these simple things?” We know that Nicodemus was a member of a group called “the Council,” a.k.a the Sanhedrin. Another person with whom you might be familiar is Joseph of Arimathea, who was also probably a member of the Sanhedrin. This Joseph crosses paths with our Nicodemus in a significant way at a later point in John’s Gospel.

What transpires with and within this person who comes to Jesus at night seeking a private audience? As we follow the Gospel of John, we find that Nicodemus is mentioned on two other occasions. First, we see that, when the Sanhedrin is plotting Jesus' death and seeking to find an occasion to have him crucified, they begin to speak out against Jesus' public ministry. To which Nicodemus, one of their number, replies, "Does our law condemn anyone without first given them a chance to speak?" Clearly, Nicodemus was more than a religious leader; he was also a legal scholar, versed in the nuances of governmental leadership among the people of Israel. Within the Sanhedrin itself, he held a significant weight and presence.

In light of this, it is interesting to see that Nicodemus comes to Jesus, a young Rabbi, at night seeking a private counsel. This occasion is eclipsed within John's Gospel with another meeting, one that would take place in the middle of the day with a woman. The two meetings could not have been more different. His question is, "How can a man be born once he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born again?" What do you think? How do you deal with its implications? The question seems obvious enough. Jesus does not reply, "No, this is not the case." Instead, he answers, "Yes; I tell that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water..." The challenge is extended to us as well, that we must be born from above.

The next thing we notice in this significant encounter between teacher and student is not just Nicodemus' importance. We also get a glimpse of how he operates. The meeting happens at night. Why? This could be because Nicodemus is afraid of what the rest of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, composed of both Pharisaic and Saddusaic Jews, will say or do in his regard for speaking with Jesus. Or, it could be, as one commentary puts it, the time for study, particularly of the Torah, was traditionally considered to be at night. Additionally, Nicodemus knew when to find Jesus without the weight of the crowds pressing in on every side. So the designation of 'night' could be symbolic of Nicodemus's walking in the darkness of his own understanding. Or it could make reference, by contrast, to the hope for his coming to the light of Christ.

As we see that the meeting takes place at night, we wonder, if we were to have a face-to-face conversation with Jesus, where would we meet him? What would be the chosen setting? Would it be here at Calvary, in broad daylight...in the evening by our

bedside? I hope it is at all of those places. In any case, Nicodemus certainly chose the setting for his meeting with the Messiah with intentionality.

As we continue in John's testimony, we hear Jesus say, "I tell you about the things of earth and you do not understand." Interesting that he does not say, "I tell you about spiritual truths and you do not comprehend them..." Jesus talks about both spirit and flesh, both of which we can discuss in dialogue about the things of earth. The 'things of the spirit' are not necessarily limited to 'the things of Heaven.' This may have proved difficult for Nicodemus to grasp; it can certainly leave us wondering. Jesus goes on to say those famous words, "For God so loved the world..." For many Christians, this verse is the central message of faith. If we just believe in Christ, we can go to God in Heaven through Christ and experience eternal life.

One of my challenges in looking at this text is the issue of 'truth,' specifically the centrality of truth. As I mentioned earlier, we all have a sense of what the truth means to us in our particular location. My question is, "Can our truths cross paths?" Could Galileo's truth of a helio-centric universe and the truth espoused by his contemporaries, that the universe was geo-centric, have room to overlap? Or were they diametrically opposed? We know from experience that the universe (i.e. Solar System) does not revolve around the earth, but around the sun. One truth was *the* truth, not both.

In our day, as we are called to be Christ's followers, what is the *centrality* of the truth that we espouse? Is our truth equal love in Christ for all? Are you, as with Jesus, like [Nicodemus], uncomprehending of the one with whom you are in dialogue? Can you share the 'other's' perspective. Do you have an ear, eye, heart to hear and 'see' the other's perspective? Do you speak without knowledge or in the knowledge of your own understanding? Or are you open to sharing the love of Christ with others and hearing their side of a conversation?

As we consider Nicodemus, the leader of the rats, Nicodemus, the small Reconstruction Era town in central KS, Nicodemus, the great scholar of Israel, how can I be a person of love, impact and understanding in the world today? I think there we find ourselves in the Nicodemus of today's text: awaiting understanding, further enlightenment and freedom from the limitations of the flesh.

As you consider the question, “What does it mean to be born from above? What is the centrality of truth in my life? How does that express itself in relationship to others in my life?” I hope that you will be challenged in the same way in which Nicodemus was, that you will be open to change and transition just as he proved himself to be.

In the last instance in which Nicodemus is mentioned in John’s Gospel, we see Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea working together to prepare the crucified body of Christ for burial. The transition that is apparent in the man’s life goes from the position of one who is filled with questions and a questioning spirit to become one who comes to a place of submission, care and respect for the person of Christ.

What does your journey look like? When do you have to stop and ask, “Say what?!” In what places are we filled with perplexity? My hope is that as we find ourselves in the midst of those places, we will be open to the kind of conversation that Christ and Nicodemus share. God loved us, *each* of us, so much that God gave the One Whom God loved most as a sacrifice for us. In spite of our own shortness of understanding, mistakes in speaking; in spite of all that we are and all that we do, God loved us enough to bring us back into community with Christ.

*How will you live out this charge? We are praying for you as you seek in love to live out the difficult questions in your own life, questions that arise because of circumstance, questions that arise because of encounters; questions that follow revelations from Christ himself.*

Amen.