

March 11th, 2018

Scripture:

Numbers 21:4-9

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:1-22

“Born from above.”

Today we have a very powerful and a very humbling series of scripture passages.

In the Old Testament --- the book of Numbers --- the people are humbled both by the challenge they face --- poisonous snake bites --- and their cure -- - looking up to God to save them from certain death ---- dependency.

In Ephesians today the Apostle Paul reminds us of our dependency on God - ---- saying ----“For it is by grace you have been saved --- through faith ---- and this is not from yourselves --- it is the gift of God...”

And then there is the story of Nicodemus in John’s Gospel.

Nicodemus comes humbly ----- and in an instant his world is turned upside down ----- and inside out by Jesus.

New Testament theologian and expert on John’s gospel Gary Burge speaks about the importance of the fact that Nicodemus comes at night.

Night here isn’t just the time after the sun goes down --- at the end of the day night ---- it’s much more than just this.

Night here according to Burge --- and I agree ---- is also spiritual darkness -- ---- the realm of evil --- untruth and ---- unbelief.

Time and time again John’s Gospel holds in tension the difference between darkness --- evil --- untruth --- and disbelief ---- and light --- truth --- God’s will --- salvation.

Right from the very beginning the difference between light and dark is introduced in John’s Gospel ----- chapter 1 verse 4 --- “In Him --- in Jesus ---- was life ---- and that life was the light of all mankind.”

And then the very next verse --- “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

And then just a few short verses later --- in verse 9 it’s ----- “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.”

And then in John 8 --- verse 12 it’s ----- “I am the light of the world.”

And all of these references to Jesus as light --- only occur in John’s Gospel -
---- the other Gospel’s don’t use this phrasing.

Light and darkness are hugely significant for John --- they are about far more than just brightness and lack of brightness --- they are spiritual states.

And so today as we read that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night ---- we have to pay attention to this detail.

In John’s Gospel --- other than Nicodemus ----- only one other person appears at night --- and that is Judas Iscariot --- and he betrays Jesus.

For John --- darkness isn’t just about the sun setting ----- for John --- darkness is evil --- untruth --- and unbelief.

And so Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night carries with it hints of evil --- untruth and disbelief --- and in stark contrast to this stands Jesus --- the light of the world.

Jesus is light --- Jesus is life --- Jesus is love ---- Jesus is hope ----- and Jesus is renewal --- salvation.

And Jesus isn’t just all of these unto Himself --- He also comes to give all of these things --- light --- life --- love --- hope ---- renewal --- salvation ----- resurrection.

But in order for us to receive these things from Him ----- we must first free ourselves up to receive them.

When Jesus talks about being born again --- or born from above --- the Greek word here for “again” ---- and “above” is exactly the same --- “anothen.”

To be born --- “anothen” --- to be born “again” ----- or born “from above” --- -- means to start all over again --- means to get rid of what we thought we knew --- assumptions --- pre-conceived notions --- and start totally fresh --- empty.

To be born again --- to be born from above ---- to be born “anothen” in the Greek ----- means to have a new reference point --- a new starting point.

In asking him to be born again --- or born from above ---- Jesus challenges Nicodemus to re-define his starting point.

To be born ----- “anothen” ---- isn’t just about changing one’s perspective a little bit --- a small adjustment here or there --- rather it’s about changing one’s whole point of reference.

To be born --- “anothen” ---- means to change your starting point --- change your birth date --- start over again.

That’s how radical a change the Kingdom of God is.

That’s how radical a shift it is to step into the light of Jesus Christ.

Jesus doesn’t say to Nicodemus --- “Hey there Nico --- just make a slight change --- following me --- stepping out of the darkness of unbelief and into the light of truth is just a slight little change.”

He doesn’t say that at all ----- instead this is what He says --- “Nicodemus just so you know stepping out from the darkness and into the light ---- means you will have a whole new starting point --- all of your old reference points - -- when you were born --- what you thought you knew --- all of that is blown to smithereens --- and you have a whole new starting point a whole new birth date --- a fresh start.”

To see what it must have felt like for Nicodemus --- let’s all take our birth date --- so get your birth date in your head --- for me it’s June 2 1970 --- but in light of John 3 today that is no longer my birth date --- my date of birth ---

my starting point has to change ----- instead of my actual birth date today becomes my new starting point ----- my new birthday.

That's what Jesus is asking of Nicodemus --- and that is what He asks of us over and over again --- find a new starting point --- find a new point of reference in your life ----- find me --- come to me ---- start over --- and over and over again.

What Nicodemus thought he knew about the temple --- about prayer --- about the scriptures --- about darkness and light --- about worship and family and business and commerce ---- about sacrificial washing and so on --- everything --- what he knew prior to this encounter with Christ has all got to be redefined now.

Nicodemus humbles himself --- he shows respect for Jesus in verse 2 saying ----- “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Nicodemus comes from the darkness yes --- but he also comes showing some humility.

Jesus response to Nicodemus is most unexpected though --- verse 3 ---- “Very truly I tell you --- no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born “anothen” --- unless they are born again --- or unless they are born from above ----- in other words unless they start over again.

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Instead of engaging his question --- Jesus forces Nicodemus to move to another level of inquiry.

And that is precisely what Jesus does with us --- forces us to engage a whole new level of inquiry in our lives.

Jesus isn't about to get all caught up in Nicodemus's questions about signs.

Jesus isn't going to engage that line of questioning ---- instead He's more concerned with the reality of one's relationship with God.

Jesus gives Nicodemus no choice but to keep up with Him --- step out into the light --- or retreat back into the darkness from which He came.

Nicodemus asks --- about performing signs --- and Jesus responds talking about the kingdom of God.

But Nicodemus doesn't understand ---- “How can someone be born again?” --- he says --- in verse 4 ----- Nicodemus is still having a completely different conversation than Jesus is.

Nicodemus is still concerned with things outside of the kingdom of God ---- he's still in the darkness --- he's still not quite willing to penetrate the deeper truths that Jesus is leading him into.

But Jesus ---- still eager to lead Nicodemus deeper ---- without missing a beat --- or slowing down at all --- turns to talk about being born of water and the Spirit.

“Verse 5 --- “Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”

Let's be honest --- do you think that clarified things for Nicodemus ---- or only further confused him?

In order for Jesus to truly get Nicodemus --- and us as ---- to see things differently Jesus must first blow up ours assumptions and framework.

It's not carelessly or by mistake that Jesus so often spoke in challenging parables and difficult to understand metaphors.

Jesus knew He had to completely reframe our points of reference so He speaks in ways that force us to think far more deeply than we do about anything else in our lives.

The 10 commandments are clear and concise --- point to point to point -----
----- much of Jesus teachings are not ----- to follow Him and His ways we have to think bravely and courageously --- we have to work at understanding what He meant --- lazy thinkers often make poor Christians.

After confusing Nicodemus about being born again --- and then further confusing and challenging him with talk of being born of water and of the Spirit ----- Jesus carries on almost relentlessly ---- verses 6 to 8 read -----
 “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

To which Nicodemus replies ---- in verse 9 --- “How can this be?”

“How can this be?”

I don’t blame Nicodemus one minute for responding with --- “How can this be?”

His world has been turned upside down --- Jesus has given him a lot to consider in a very short time --- but that’s what Jesus does.

The only hope Jesus has of shaking us out of our complacency and comfort is to challenge us deeply --- the way He is challenging Nicodemus today --- and the Pharisees --- and His closest disciples too --- over and over and over again.

Start over Jesus says to Nicodemus ----- start over right from the very beginning find a new reference point --- a new point of departure --- forget what you thought you knew --- scrap it all and start over ---- come out from amongst the shadows and the darkness and step into the light of God.

And so Jesus says --- “Just as you cannot tell where the wind comes from or where it is going ---- so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit --- so it is with the Spirit --- it comes and it goes --- it leads and it guides as it so pleases.”

“Nicodemus --- replies --- verse 9 --- “How can this be?”

Nicodemus is left scratching his head --- he’s confused --- “How can this be?” --- he says.

And remember Nicodemus isn’t some kind of a novice or beginner --- as verse 1 says --- “he was a member of the Jewish ruling council.”

“He was a member of the Jewish ruling council.”

Nicodemus was bright and smart and clever ----- but everything he thought he knew has been upended.

He is baffled and he is disturbed.

He comes to Jesus as someone in the know --- but now he isn't so sure anymore --- without realizing it Nicodemus has stepped into a light --- a new reality he didn't even know existed.

His commitment to the Torah --- his understandings of prayer and sacrifice -- his understanding of election --- responsibility --- his sense of privilege --- all of these things have suddenly been challenged by Jesus --- and he's not so sure what to think any more.

He knows he can't just dismiss Jesus --- Jesus has done too many powerful things to simply be dismissed at this point --- but he's not so sure that he can fully trust Him either.

He belongs to the Jewish ruling council --- does Nicodemus --- he's coming to Jesus one teacher to another ----- one believer to another --- one thinker to another --- but Jesus quite simply blows him away and challenges him on every single level of his understanding.

Nicodemus should have no problem grasping the fact that the Spirit of God comes and goes as it pleases --- he should have no problem grasping the fact that the Spirit of God transforms as it sees fit --- when it sees fit and why it sees fit --- but that Jesus seems to have been given this same power troubles him a wee bit.

But Jesus has just finished clearing out the Temple courts --- overturning tables --- scattering coins --- driving out sacrificial livestock.

Jesus has just finished turning water into wine.

Jesus has just finished over turning all that Nicodemus once understood to be the true --- and all of a sudden Nicodemus knows something radical and usurping is happening with this Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus is ushering in a new era --- a new way --- a new understanding of the Kingdom of God --- and this new understanding includes talk of being born -- -- “anothen” --- born again --- born from above.

And quite frankly he’s not too sure about it --- “How can this be?” --- he says.

What Nicodemus thinks will simply be a head to head --- heart to heart conversation with Jesus in the darkness turns out to be something completely different.

Jesus blows him away.

And in the end --- in the later half of the passage what does Jesus ask of Nicodemus ----- exactly what He asks of each and every one of us as well.

Simply to believe.

He doesn’t ask Nicodemus to understand or to grasp or to explain ---- He simply asks him to believe.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever --- believes in him shall not perish but have life eternal.”

It doesn’t read --- “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever --- understands Him --- or agrees with Him --- or feels good about Him shall not perish but have life eternal.” --- it’s who so ever believes.

And then verse 18 contains the word believe 3 times.

Jesus is all consumed with whether or not we believe --- not understand or agree --- or feel good about it ---- but believe.

Anyone can doubt --- doubts asks little --- to believe --- that is something totally different ----- to believe asks something of us ---- Jesus asks something of us.

Believe is what Jesus asks of Nicodemus --- not agree ---- not understand but believe.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever --- believes in him shall not perish but have life eternal.”

Nicodemus comes all geared up to have a tete a tete --- a heart to heart with Jesus --- one teacher to another one theologian to another.

And Jesus simply blows him away.

Jesus redefines the whole framework of the conversation saying God’s will - -- God’s Spirit --- the Kingdom of God is like the wind it blows when and where and why it wants --- we know not where it comes from and we know not where it is going --- believe me Nicodemus Jesus says ---- believe me I know.

But Nicodemus isn’t so sure --- he’s not quite ready yet to surrender.

Step out of the night --- step out of the darkness and into the light ---- Jesus says to Nicodemus --- if you do this the Kingdom of God is there for you in all of its beauty.

God doesn’t want to condemn you Nicodemus Jesus says.

Verse 17 reads --- “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

God doesn’t want to condemn you bit if you don’t believe what I’m saying Nicodemus than you have already condemned yourself.

It’s a total reboot that God advises Nicodemus ---- not just a re-start --- or a slight change --- but a whole new reboot --- a whole new start over -- a do over ---- a whole new reference point --- a whole new birth date to start from.

But --- Nicodemus says --- “How can this be?”

There’s a whole lot of Nicodemus in all of us.

We too --- just like Nicodemus want to come to Jesus in our time of confusion and uncertainty and chat it out with Him.

But Nicodemus quickly finds out were not on equal footing with Jesus ----- and sometimes when we go to Him asking for help --- or clarification --- Jesus simply invites us deeper into the kingdom --- and says believe --- just believe.

I ---like Nicodemus --- have gone to Jesus many times in prayer looking for more ---- more explanation --- more information --- more clarity --- and like Nicodemus I too can say I've come out blown away ---- like Nicodemus I too can say the response I got from Jesus is --- just believe.

Jesus doesn't always give us what we want --- but he does always give us what we need.

Nicodemus comes looking for some explanations ---- he wants to know more about these signs that Jesus has been doing ----- Jesus on the other hand doesn't answer his questions about signs --- instead Jesus challenges him to believe --- to surrender.

And it's the very same message in Ephesians today --- "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith ----- and this is not from yourselves --- it is the gift of God --- not by works so that no one can boast..."

Nicodemus will only ever be saved if he believes --- not by doing this or doing that but by believing --- by accepting God's gift.

That's the beauty goodness and truth of the reality of God ----- who He is and how He treats us --- He comes to us with this great gift of salvation --- renewal --- and reconciliation --- but we have to believe and be changed.

John Scholar Karoline Lewis says --- "As soon as we become comfortable or complacent with God moving into the neighbourhood we ignore the radical unbelievable claim of the Word made flesh."

"As soon as we become comfortable or complacent with God moving into the neighbourhood --- coming in Christ ---- we ignore the radical unbelievable claim of the Word made flesh."

Nicodemus was anything but comfortable or complacent with Jesus having moved into the neighbourhood.

Jesus had come --- made water into wine ---- Jesus had come and overturned the tables in the Temple courts --- Jesus had come and scattered the coins and driven out the sacrificial livestock --- and so Nicodemus had some questions for Him.

Full marks to Nicodemus --- he's one of the very first people to sense that something radically different and new and God inspired is happening here -- --- so what does he do? --- he goes to Jesus to ask questions ---- he wants to know more so he goes to talk to Jesus.

“Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Full marks to Nicodemus ---- he comes humbly before Jesus ----- asking questions --- and showing some respect.

We just sang --- “humble thyself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up.”

That's' what Nicodemus did --- he came humbly ---- and that's what Jesus did --- He lifted him up to a higher and greater and deeper more powerful experience of the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus knows there is something new happening and he knows that this something new must be coming from God so he goes to Jesus to ask some questions.

Hats off to Nicodemus for stepping into the light --- even if it did totally confuse him in the process.

He may not have liked the answers he got ----- “How can this be?” --- is how he responded --- but hats off to him for recognizing that something different was happening here with Jesus.

Even after Jesus turns his world upside down Nicodemus remains puzzled --
- “How can this be?” ---- but the picture we have of him is one who came to
Jesus seeking --- asking --- humbly inquiring.

That’s what Jesus asks of us too.

Come to me.

Seek me.

Ask me.

Consult me.

Believe in me.

I didn’t come to condemn you ---- I came to save you --- Jesus says ---- but
if you don’t believe I’m afraid you’ve already condemned yourself.

Verse 18 from John 3 reads ---- “Whoever believes in him is not
condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already...”

To be born --- “anothen” --- to be born again --- or born from above ---
means to believe in He who is above --- Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for today.

Too often we complicate it ----- asking it to be explained in ways that make
sense to us ---- but at its heart it’s very simple --- believe and be saved --- or
don’t believe and be condemned by your unbelief.

Once we believe --- it all changes ----- once we believe we go to Him ---
once we believe we find ourselves talking with Him --- prayer.

And once we believe --- we find ourselves turning to what He has said ---
the scriptures.

And once we believe --- we find ourselves doing what we are now doing ----
worshiping Him.

What starts with one great act of trust --- believing in Him --- turns into one great adventure after another great adventure after another great adventure -- - on into eternity.

I don't know about you --- but as I think about this passage.

I am so delighted that God sent His Son.

I am so delighted that God came to save me.

I am so delighted that God came to save you --- each and every one of us.

It's a beautiful thing --- this life in the Gospel --- this Jesus who came and made sure there was enough wine at the wedding.

This Jesus who re-organized things in the Temple courts so that the focus was on the right things.

This Jesus who talked with Nicodemus when Nicodemus had some questions.

This Jesus who challenges us to simply believe and be saved.

Whether it's trouble at work --- trouble at home.

Whether its financial challenges ---- health scares --- exams at school ----- a sick pet we're not sure what to do with -----

----- whether it's when is my car finally going to die and I'll have to replace it --- whether it's when should I retire --- when can I retire ---

----- whether it's what am I going to do with my aging parent --- or parents -

---- whether it's am I going to have to move soon Lord because I think I need a fresh start ----

----- whether it's I'm really worried about my kids --- their relationships --- their jobs -- their health --- the trip they're on --- how much they drink --- who their partner is --- the fact that they don't have a partner and so on --- many are the worries of this world.

But Jesus is there for us --- Jesus is here for us.

Believe in Jesus ---- trust in Him ---- He's here to save us from all of these things drowning us --- suffocating us --- consuming us.

He's here to guide us --- and lead us --- take us --- like Nicodemus from the darkness into the light --- that's the truth and the very heart of the Gospel.

We can doubt --- we can want more --- we can feel anxious --- troubled ---- uncertain ----- but God is in our midst --- and we have to trust Him and believe that He's got this --- all the rest falls into place when we believe ----- --- and we trust ----- and we obey.

Guide us o thou great redeemer ----- pilgrims through this barren land.

We are weak but though art mighty --- hold us with thy powerful hand.

Bread of heaven --- bread of heaven ---- feed us now and evermore.

When we tread the verge of Jordan --- bid our anxious fears subside.

Let the fire and cloudy pillar ---- lead us all our journey through ---- strong deliverer strong dilverer --- be thou still our strength and shield.

Amen and Amen.