

Lent 2-March 5, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

John 3:1-17

Planting Seeds of Faith Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Each week in March, we will be hearing longer than usual stories in our gospel readings about specific people who encounter Jesus. Next week, you will hear from Kendra Kappler as she describes Jesus' encounter with the Woman at the Well. The following week Jesus has an encounter with a blind beggar and in the final week of March, we will get a glimpse of Easter as Jesus raises Lazarus from his grave and we hear how Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha respond to Jesus who demonstrates his power over death.

But today, we tee up this series of Encounters with Jesus with the man who came to Jesus in the dark of night. Nicodemus. We love this story since it ends with the beloved and most familiar verse in all scripture, John 3:16. This is the verse that Martin Luther called the gospel in a nutshell. But before we get to this beloved verse and I apply this good news to you, this encounter that Nicodemus with Jesus has some troubling, yet important lessons to teach us about what it means to have the gospel given to you.

From the beginning of this story, we learn that Nicodemus was not just any Pharisee, but a leader of the Pharisees. The people who were known for keeping and teaching the laws of God but were notoriously opposed to Jesus. Since none of us are Jewish, we often dismiss the possibility that we might have traits like Pharisees. I would also add that it is good that you have **some** of these traits. The Pharisees worked hard at keeping the commands of God and worked hard at making sure others were following these rules. We need people like this in the church and in our communities. The problem of being like a Pharisee arises when the law is the only word of God that you know, and you believe that obeying these words of God will help to save you. What is most troubling for me in this story about Nicodemus is that he encounters Jesus in person, yet Jesus seems to withhold the gospel from him.

We also learn that Nicodemus was a seeker. He was looking for Jesus. Nicodemus could have made it easier for himself by looking for Jesus in the daylight, but instead, Nicodemus lit his candle and went searching for Jesus in the dark of night. Darkness and light are common themes that John often uses in his gospel and the darkness that Nicodemus is walking in likely means more the time of day. People who believe they can be saved by their good works are searching for something more to do. They even believe it is their job to find Jesus.

When Nicodemus finds Jesus, he addresses him as a teacher and as who one has come from God because of the signs that he has been doing. Nicodemus was looking for something other than what was standing right in front of him. Nicodemus was intrigued by miracles Jesus had performed such as turning water into wine, but Nicodemus did not yet realize the transformation that Jesus could make in him by hearing the gospel.

Signs are intended to grab your attention. You probably have seen signs that say, "we made you look", but then that is all they say. There is still something missing. Just as Nicodemus was missing something after seeing and hearing about signs. The gospel of John is even called the book of signs. I do not dismiss that Jesus used signs to draw people's attention, but he performed these signs to point people to him. Signs may be the seeds of faith, but they are not the harvest.

We had an event this week that gave our family a little chill down our spines. We might even say it was a sign. My mother has had a Christmas cactus in her kitchen for many years. She inherited it from her mother and her mother from her mother. This plant is very likely more than 150 years old. And if you know something about these plants, they are very unpredictable. Many people attempt to understand how to get these plants to bloom at Christmas by giving the proper sunlight at the right time or watering or withholding just the right amount. These plants can go years without making a single blossom or they can be the most gorgeous of all plants completely full of flowers. I don't recall the last time that mom's plant had a blossom, but on Monday morning when mom passed away, we came back to her kitchen to find the Christmas cactus had a flower. One flower. Again, it was a sign that still brings a chill down my spine, but I did not hear the flower speak to me. This sign did not make me believe in the power of Christmas cactuses, but it turned me to Jesus who brings forth life in the midst of death.

Since Nicodemus had not yet heard the gospel, everything that he hears goes through his filter of his understanding of the law. For each of us who have heard the gospel can clearly understand that Jesus is speaking about baptism when he tells Nicodemus that he must be born from above. But when Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born of water and the spirit, he was confused. Nicodemus is still wanting to see a sign rather than hear a promise that you cannot see.

Jesus confuses Nicodemus even more by talking about the wind. Those of us who have heard the gospel and have the evangelical understanding that Jesus chooses us rather than we have to find our way through the dark to find him, also understand how Jesus chooses us. The wind personifies the Holy Spirit who blows when and wherever he chooses. The Spirit, the wind can be heard, but it cannot be seen and in spite of our best efforts we have no control over faith. We simply believe this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is troubling for many how Jesus chooses us much like how we don't often like the wind. This time of year, we often say that we don't mind if we get even a few inches of snow, as long as the wind doesn't blow. Or we can put up with the cold, as long as the wind doesn't blow. In the summer, we can put up with a little heat as long as the wind doesn't turn it into a hot furnace blowing on us. Driving is enjoyable unless there are extreme winds. In the fall we want some wind to dry our crops, but not too much to flatten them. Our weather apps on our phones can be very helpful tools to know the direction and intensity of the wind, but we can't use our phones to decide when and where the wind will blow. Nicodemus didn't like things that were out of his control, and we don't often either.

Last summer, we had a wonderful unexpected experience with the wind. I never had experienced flying a kite, but my son and his wife purchased some kites, unlike those that we bought in the dime store that had a 6 ft string attached. These kites would actually fly. These kites came as kits and they put them together, but they needed one more thing before they would fly. The wind. What we needed most, we had no control over, but it was given to us, and we simply enjoyed this gift of the day.

We don't know for sure what happened to Nicodemus. Did he ever receive the gospel, or did he continue his efforts to find Jesus and earn his place in the kingdom of God? John records two more encounters that Nicodemus has with Jesus, but we never know if Nicodemus believes that the good news that Jesus came to give is for him. But we know that Jesus kept planting seeds of faith and we believe in the work of the Holy Spirit to bring faith when and wherever it chooses.

You too, have encountered Jesus today. Not with a sign that he has performed, but by His Word that has been spoken to you. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. This good news is for you. Amen.