

First Presbyterian Church  
Greenfield, Indiana  
Pastor John J. Paulson

March 20, 2011

Second Sunday in Lent

God Loves Us All!

Genesis 12:1-4

God calls and we answer!

Psalm 121

God is with us always!

John 3:1-17

God makes us new!

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Believe!

*Informally before the sermon starts: John's gospel was written sometime after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and, in his own way, John tells us the story of Jesus in our world. When John is writing, he knows what happened to Jesus; he knows about the trial, the crucifixion, and, especially he knows about the resurrection and what that means to all people. He clearly tells us in the sixteenth and seventeenth verses of the third chapter of his book: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."*

*In fact, John even tells us why he took the time and effort to write his book in the first place. These stories about Jesus are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.<sup>1</sup>*

*So as John sits down to write or dictate his book, he knows how few people fully accepted Jesus as God's Son. He knows that Jesus is, as he says, the truth and the light sent by God into the world to save the world. He knows how important it is to get this story out into the public; how important it is for people to hear this account of Jesus' ministry and some of the events that convinced him that Jesus was truly the Son of God. He wanted to give everybody the opportunity to accept Jesus and the promise of salvation that he offered. So he wrote about some of people Jesus touched and some of the ways he touched them. He had to pick and choose what to include about Jesus, because, as he says the very end of his book, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have*

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise identified, all quotes are from the book of John and are my paraphrases.

*room for the books that would be written.” Today he tells us about a man named Nicodemus who met with Jesus.*

**Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer!**

**Amen**

Nicodemus has come to see Jesus in the middle of the night. Under the cover of darkness, this Pharisee, this leader of the Jewish religious community, sneaks over to the house where Jesus is visiting to spend some time with the one who is shaking up the status quo among the Jews in Jerusalem. Just a couple of days ago Jesus really stirred things up by chasing the animal sellers and money changers out of the temple. Many people are curious; the religious leaders of the Jews are getting a bit, well, actually more than just a bit, concerned. Who is this man Jesus and what is he doing? What is he teaching and why is it different from what we teach?

Although Nicodemus can't admit it among his peers on the Jewish ruling council, he realizes that Jesus is not just like many of the itinerant preachers who periodically come to town declaring that they have a new message from God. Nicodemus realizes that Jesus has been sent by God with a new message and a new interpretation of the scriptures. He wants to know more, so he makes his way through the dark streets and quietly knocks on Jesus' door. As Jesus always does when people approach him, he lets him in and they talk.

In this nocturnal conversation, it appears that Nicodemus may be the first to hear Jesus' message about a new way of life offered by and required by God. Something that Jesus calls being "born again."

Of course Philip, Andrew, Simon Peter and Nathaniel, the first disciples that Jesus has chosen, have experienced first-hand what it means to be touched and called by Jesus. They know personally that their lives have been forever changed. They know the same thing that Saul is to find out on the Road to Damascus when he meets Jesus; the same thing that Matthew and Luke and the other disciples will find out when they begin to follow Jesus. The same thing that Mary and Martha and Lazarus will find out when they entertain Jesus in their home. They know what Abram felt and found out when he answered God's call those many, many years ago. They know that God

reaches out and offers peace and love and hope to those willing to accept it. They know God's offer of salvation and love is for them, as we know it is for us.

It is difficult to look at some of the pictures coming out of Japan in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami. The news keeps repeating and repeating the horrible pictures of flood waters tossing houses and cars around like they were toy cars and houses being tossed around by a two year old. If you do a little digging, you can find pictures that go beyond the destruction and give us a glimpse of the hope for the future. There is a beautiful photo of a new mother cuddling her brand new baby in one of the shelters. There is a picture of a woman sharing her food with her dog. There are pictures of kids on swings with smiles on their faces right next to one of the evacuation centers. There are pictures of people helping others as they crowd together in search of warmth and comfort. These are pictures that offer hope in the midst of the crisis. That's what Jesus offered and continues to offer. He continues to offer hope and comfort to the world in the midst of the crisis that the world constantly seems to be in.

Back to our story. Jesus is just at the beginning of his ministry when Nicodemus comes to visit. Not much is really known yet about what he is really all about. There certainly are stories circulating about the events at his baptism and the statements of The Baptizer that Jesus is the one he has been preparing for.

Rumors have spread about him changing water into wine at a wedding in the town of Cana. Most of Jerusalem has heard about the ruckus he caused in the temple the other day. If it had happened today, we would be bombarded with pictures of Jesus doing this and Jesus doing that just as we are with pictures of Japan.

It seems obvious that there is something very special about this new preacher who has come to town. And, Nicodemus wants to see for himself, so, he goes to Jesus and tells him that he has heard about him, and that he knows that Jesus is a man of God.

The meeting does not go well, but did we really expect it to? When we hear about this midnight meeting what do we expect to come out of this conversation? Do we expect that Jesus will outline his ministry and Nicodemus will immediately understand and accept what Jesus is all about?

If we remember how John began his gospel, we know that John has already set the tone for Jesus encounters with the Jews, and Nicodemus is one of their leaders.

At the beginning of his book, John begins his story by telling us about Jesus. To emphasize the connection between Jesus and God, he initially calls him The Word, the Word of God come to life. He says that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.” This is our first clue that the world did not understand who Jesus was and what he was about. Our first clue that Nicodemus might have a problem understanding what Jesus was telling him.

As John continues, paints a picture of those listening to Jesus that might resemble a classroom full of high school juniors, trying to understand the teacher who is teaching in Japanese. Try as hard as they can, they can only grasp a word or two once in a while; the rest of the lecture goes right over their heads. Only when the translator comes into the class do they understand tangents and cosines and graphs.

Of course looking back at this meeting, we can see that the words of Jesus about being “born again” don’t mean the same thing to Nicodemus that they mean to Jesus.

Don’t you wonder how John knew about this meeting? There were only two people present, Jesus and Nicodemus. We have no evidence that Jesus told anybody about it, so it must have been Nicodemus himself.

I can imagine Nicodemus telling the story of his first meeting with Jesus to John during an interview for his book many years after it happened....

**(Read this next part in first person Nicodemus)**

It was shortly before midnight when I approached the door of the house where Jesus was staying. He let me in, and told me what he was all about. He told me that God offered every one of us the opportunity for a new start in life. That we had to change the way we were living and really listen to what God is saying to us. He was telling us that there is a new way of living, he called it being born again, and that he was sent into the world by God to share this with us and give us the offer of eternal life. I remember so well when he said that his Father, God, loves the world so much that he sent his only Son into the world to save us.

Of course I didn’t understand what he was saying. I got so hung up on what he was saying about being born again. I sputtered something about whether it was

possible to enter the womb for a second time to be born again. How silly I must have sounded. He, of course, thought I was putting him on. What”, he says, “you are a leader of the Jews and don’t know about being born of the spirit and being baptized by water?”

“I just couldn’t get that picture of a grown man being born, I mean actually born, out of my mind. I thought he was really teaching some far out understanding of our scriptures. When I look back on this first meeting, I can see exactly what he was telling me. I was given the opportunity to hear this message right at the beginning of his ministry, and I completely missed it. It wasn’t until almost three years later that I fully understood what I had heard him tell me.

Being born again has nothing to do with a physical birth. It is completely spiritual. You know that feeling that you get when you know God is on your side. When you can fully accept the words of the twenty third psalm that God is with you no matter where you are. It is that feeling that you have in your heart when you know that Jesus died for you; you personally.

For some people it strikes out of the blue like it did for Saul when he met Jesus and was instantly changed from enemy to friend. His baptism marked him as a changed, a “born again” man. For others it happens gradually during their lives as they realize the presence of Jesus and the power and love and hope that Jesus brings into their lives. For those people who are baptized as infants, their spiritual life grows through the teaching of their parents, through church school and vacation Bible school, and as they prepare for and join the church through confirmation. It continues through Youth Group and Bible Study and serving the church. They can’t pinpoint one instance when it felt like lightning struck and they were changed. Yet, just as surely as someone who can, they are filled with the Spirit and are truly born again Christians.

I wish I had known what Jesus was telling me that night. My life sure would have been easier. As it was, even though I knew Jesus was a man of God, I didn’t openly show my feelings and love for him until after he died when I helped Joseph bury him. Oh, I did speak up for him once in the Sanhedrin, but didn’t push it when one of the chief priests asked me what I meant. I got quiet in a hurry.

I hope you all understand now what Jesus was talking about. That all of you have accepted him into your lives as I finally did. That all of you have been born again and have accepted Jesus as your personal savior. Amen.