

## **Lent 2A 2020 sermon**

### **John 3:1-17**

*There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*

*"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

*"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

Much of my time this past week has been spent reading online news reports about the coronavirus: where it has spread; how virulent it is; what the Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, and other medical and scientific experts are recommending; what various Bishops are suggesting their priests and congregations do; and then trying to decide how to implement prudent precautionary procedures here at Christ Church, in order to safeguard the physical health of us all. It was certainly not the way I had anticipated spending my week.

Now, concern for the physical health of the people in this parish is an important part of my ministry – and the ministry of all of us. When I become aware of someone who is sick and could use prayers, cards, or food, I send out an email to our Pastoral Care list – and you respond with prayers, cards, and food! I visit people in hospitals, stay with family members in the waiting room during surgeries (if they want me to), take communion to the sick and homebound. Jesus spent a good part of his ministry healing people. A person's physical health was important to him; and it is to us.

But as this week wore on, I began to notice that my attention was almost totally focused “out there,” in the material world: the world of viruses and quarantines and statistics and 24-hour news cycles and stockpiling supplies and homemade recipes for hand sanitizers.

In today’s Gospel, Nicodemus, also, is focused on the world “out there,” and as a result, he cannot understand what it is that Jesus is trying to teach him. Fr. John Shea notes that, in today’s Gospel, “Nicodemus symbolizes the Pharisaic mindset. This mindset is attached to externals. It relishes first places at table, long robes with wide phylacteries, polished cups, and salutations in the marketplace (see Matt 23:1-25; Luke 20:45-46). This fascination with the outside hinders this mindset from recognizing hidden, *inner* truths. Therefore, there is a large segment of reality that is not available to this [unenlightened] perspective...”<sup>1</sup> which is focused so exclusively on externalities.

Nicodemus is anchored in the kingdom of this world, and sees the world only with the eyes of the flesh and the eyes of the mind. But Jesus wants to move him into the kingdom of God, where he can see with the eyes of the heart, the eyes of the soul. Jesus says to him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born...” – and then Jesus uses a word which, in the Greek, can have two different meanings: 1. “from above,” or 2. “again”. Nicodemus, mired as he is in the physical world and seeing only through the eyes of the flesh and the eyes of the mind, assumes the second meaning – that someone must be born *again*. This leads to the absurd image of a grown man climbing back into his mother’s womb. But of course, Jesus is **not** talking about being born *again*, but rather about being born *from above*.

Jesus continues, “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water *and* Spirit.” Fr. Shea notes that Jesus “acknowledges physical birth, ‘born of water,’ and adds another dimension, ‘Spirit.’ To see the kingdom of God, to understand a spiritual teaching, one needs both. It is important to acknowledge that one has to be both flesh *and* spirit to receive a spiritual teaching on earth. It is not enough to be merely spiritual or merely physical. But since Nicodemus has tried to understand Jesus’ words on the physical level and has misinterpreted them, he must be told that the merely physical cannot understand the spiritual. Flesh can understand flesh, but only spirit can understand Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> (unquote)

As I was writing this sermon and was reflecting on Fr. Shea’s comments, I thought to myself: “Where is the *spiritual* aspect of what is happening in our world surrounding this whole matter of the coronavirus?” And I realized that, during all my attempts to research the situation (which changes each day) and try to discern the precautions we should be taking here at Christ Church, I was seeing with the eyes of my flesh and the eyes of my mind, but I had yet to look at the situation with the eyes of my spirit, my heart. And yet right here in our Gospel, Jesus is saying to us that yes, the physical (being born of water) is important; but so, also and equally, is the spiritual (being born of the Spirit). Addressing the

physical realities of this current coronavirus situation is important; but it must be grounded in, and informed by, realities of God's Spirit.

What happens to me when I get so swept away with focusing on this physical world that I lose my grounding in the realities of the Spirit? I find myself feeling adrift in the realm of this world, victim to the endless news cycles and the newest statistics and the ego clashes of politicians. When I find myself unmoored from God's Spirit, I also find myself susceptible to fear, which is an enemy to faith and trust in God.

I will not, with any wisdom or perspective, be able to see clearly this situation in which we all find ourselves if I am *only* looking through the eyes of my flesh and the eyes of my mind at coronavirus news and information and statistics and thinking how we might protect ourselves from becoming physically infected. *None* of us can see fully, clearly, and with true wisdom and perspective, if we are **only** using the eyes of our flesh and the eyes of our mind. In the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, St. Augustine said that the whole purpose of this life, the reason we celebrate the sacraments, the reason we read the scriptures, is to "restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen." To restore to health the eye of the heart, the eye of the spirit, whereby God may be seen.

The reason we celebrate the Eucharist is not to **physically** nourish our bodies with a small, tasteless wafer of bread or sip of wine. Rather, as we say after receiving Communion, "Eternal God... you have fed us with *spiritual* food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood." Spiritual food, to nourish our spiritual selves.

St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "I pray that.., with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you..." (Ephesians 1:17-18) In today's Gospel reading, the eyes of Nicodemus' heart are *not* enlightened, consumed as he is with seeing through the eyes of his flesh and the eyes of his mind. Nicodemus cannot "see" the spiritual realities Jesus is trying to teach him. And the same is true for you and me. We need to ask ourselves, "Are we being so *dominated* by the eyes of our flesh and the eyes of our mind that we cannot see God's kingdom around us or hear the Spirit speak to our soul, no matter what is happening in the world around us? Are we becoming filled with fear instead of faith?"

If so, let me suggest that there is an answer to be found in today's Gospel.

You see, if we look at today's Gospel lesson as the finely-crafted story that it is, we will be blown away by the brilliant manner in which Jesus first confuses and mystifies Nicodemus, a confident Pharisee and member of the Jewish Ruling Council; and then, when Nicodemus doesn't know which way is up and which way is down, Jesus hits him between the eyes with the clearest, most concentrated summary of the Gospel message imaginable: that verse which Martin Luther called "the Gospel in a nutshell." Nicodemus, born of water but not yet of the

Spirit, is reeling after the onslaught of Jesus' spiritual teachings, which the eyes of his flesh cannot see and the eyes of his mind cannot comprehend. Climb back into his mother's womb? The wind blows where it chooses? Being born of water and spirit? Nicodemus is discombobulated, which makes him vulnerable to Jesus' *coup de grâce*.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved (healed, made whole) through him.”

Perhaps when you and I get so fixated on the external world that we become unmoored and fearful, *we* might repeat those words. For if the eyes of our heart are even *slightly* opened, they cannot **help** but see the blazing spiritual reality of God's healing, grounding Love. I have to believe that that divine outpouring of Love began to open even the eyes of Nicodemus' heart. For at the end of John's Gospel, after Jesus is crucified, and Joseph of Arimathea comes to take his body down from the cross and bury it in his own tomb, there is a man there who helps Joseph with the burial – a man who brings 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe to anoint Jesus' body.

That man's name is Nicodemus.<sup>2</sup>

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004

<sup>2</sup> John 19:38-42