

Nicodemus: Need a Make-Over?

John 1:10-13; 3:1-10,16

In our sermons during worship through the fall we are looking together at the story of Jesus as we find it in the gospel according to Saint John, one of four accounts of Jesus' life and ministry that we have in the pages of Holy Scripture. And we are focusing in particular on the people whom Jesus meets, whose lives intersect with Jesus' life, and by that intersection, by crossing paths with Jesus, their lives are changed. John tells us at the end of his gospel that he has only included some of the stories of Jesus. There are so many stories, he says, that "if I were to include them all, well, there wouldn't be enough pages in the book to write. But I have chosen these stories that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). That is, these are chosen on purpose that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that in believing you may have life eternal, abundant in His name.

So in these interactions we see how Jesus' life somehow is communicated to the lives of others. So far in this series of sermons,

- we have looked at Jesus' interaction with a wild prophet of a man by the name of John the Baptist baptizing folks down by the Jordan River. A great figure but who says of Jesus, "he must increase and I must decrease." Remarkably, John the Baptist doesn't mind coming in second place to this Jesus – indeed in ceding to Jesus first place in his life, John says that he finds his purpose and joy.
- And then we have seen Jesus interacting with four country boys who become his followers: Andrew, Simon and Nathaniel and Phillip. They each know Jesus' names. They get the names, the titles, right. But it's only when they interact with Jesus one-on-one that they really come to know him and their lives are transformed by that intimate interaction.
- We have seen Jesus interacting with his mother, a family member, no longer as a small child, but as an adult with his mother. Jesus and his mother are together at a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee, the region where Jesus was raised, so he's not far from his childhood home. And they are there at this wedding celebrating when the wine runs out . . . and life of the party is about to run out too. When the wine goes it's as if the party is over and Jesus' mother needles Jesus just a little bit, as if to say "Son, you can fix this, do something!" And Jesus actually pushes her off a little bit to begin with, but then He does it – he does what she asks. She knows him. And out of kindness He does it. She knows that he won't want this young family to be embarrassed. He is kind, He notices our weaknesses and so He uses his power, that will be reserved ultimately in John's gospel for His death on the cross, to remind us that He can take ordinary water and turn it into wine . . . in such abundance (there were gallons and gallons of this new wine) that the party need never end! And this is what He wants to do with our lives, with your life and mine: to give to us, as it were, a party that will never end. Indeed, this image, of an unending wedding, is a picture used in scripture to show what heaven is like – heaven come down to earth. A little taste of it right here and now.

This Sunday, we move down south from the north, from the countryside into the city, from those who are unsophisticated we move into the realm of sophistication, as Jesus comes into Jerusalem, and there comes face to face with a person who is a leader of the Jewish people, a member of the Council known as the Sanhedrin, and a member of the group known as the Pharisees. The Pharisees often get bad press. Some of them, clearly, were bad guys, but not all of them. As a whole, they Pharisees actually functioned as the primary Jewish lay renewal movement of their time. And they were influential for a hundred years before Jesus, and beyond Jesus, until the year A.D. 70 where they were the only surviving Jewish religious group, apart from the Christians, when Rome came in and destroyed Jerusalem. So the Pharisees are the forefathers of modern Rabbinic Judaism. And the person we meet, by the name of Nicodemus, belonged to this particular group. A believer in God all his life as far as we know, yet his life and relationship with God were forever changed by his interaction with Jesus. And we are going to be thinking about the process by which his life was changed as we look at his story today.

This morning, though, I want to enter his story as it were “from the side,” by telling the story of somebody else whose story in some ways is quite similar to Nicodemus’s story. This is the story of a man by the name of Malcolm Muggeridge. Some of you may know that name. He died in 1990. He was a British journalist. He was a cynical curmudgeon of a person whose main job in life was to disagree with just about everybody. And he made a living out of doing this. He disagreed agreeably and disagreeably, and was on television quite a bit in Britain and in this country as well. Malcolm Muggeridge began his career as a journalist in the 1930s, at which time he was a Socialist, verging on being a Communist who had no time whatsoever for God. But when you pick up his story 30 years later, in the late 1960s, you find him publicly embracing Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, joining the Roman Catholic Church and speaking about this at every opportunity that he could find. It’s a remarkable spiritual journey. I began university at about that time, and the news of his conversion made a powerful impact upon my life

Muggeridge speaks about God’s work in his life in a book called Jesus Rediscovered, published in 1969, and I want to read you some excerpts from that. He writes like this. He says:

It was as I was padding about the streets of Moscow that the other dream, the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, dissolved for me never to be revived. Those gray anonymous figures likewise padding about the street seemed infinitely remote, withdrawn, forever strangers. So many paradises springing up all over the place, all with many mansions. Mansions of light and love, the most majestic of all the master paradise on which all the others were based [*DR: Not over in the Soviet Block but here!*], on Manhattan Island. Oh what marvelous [*DR: remember he’s a cynic*] mansions there, reaching into the sky with heavenly music overflowing the streets and buildings. What brilliant light spilling out, what hopes and desires.

. . . And you [*DR: he’s speaking about God made known in Jesus – in the idiom of Theodore Dostoevsky in the scene of The Grand Inquisitor, in the Brothers Karamazov*] I never caught a glimpse of you in any of these human paradises unless you were an old shoe shine man on a windy corner in Chicago one February morning smiling from ear to ear. Or a little man with a lame leg in the immigration department in New York whose smiling patience as he listened to one immigrant after another seemed to reach from here to eternity . . . or at Kiev at an Easter service when the Ukrainian famine of the 1930s was in full swing and millions were dying. [*DR: Muggeridge was one of the few journalists who exposed this enormous tragedy. No one in the west could believe that millions were dying*]. What a congregation that was packed in tight, squeezed together like sardines. I myself was pressed against a stone pillar scarcely able to breathe . . . So many gray, hungry faces all luminous like an El Greco painting and all singing. How they sang about how there was no help except in you. I could have almost touched you then . . .

“I could have almost touched you then,” he says! But he didn’t. He didn’t. For 30 years he didn’t. That was the length of his journey until he could reorganize, restructure his life, find a place for these intimations of God made known in Christ, find a place within the structure of his life to bring Christ back in. It took 30 years for this seed to grow, to germinate, to become something radical within his life so that his life was made over again.

That’s Muggeridge’s story! And I share it with you because in many ways Nicodemus’ story as we know it in scripture in John 2 is somewhat like it. Not over a period of 30 years, but certainly over a period of perhaps some 30 months, perhaps over two or three years, this same kind of transition takes place. A transition we are able to see because John tells us of Nicodemus not only once, but three times throughout the length of this gospel.

We see Nicodemus first of all in the passage of scripture that we read a few moments ago when Nicodemus comes to Jesus (the scripture says) ‘by night’ (and in John’s gospel, frequently when John says something like that you know there’s a double meaning. It’s literal he comes at night time, but it’s also spiritual: he comes in his darkness, his spiritual darkness) to meet with Jesus. He is all alone. He doesn’t want anybody to know. That’s why it’s night time. He’s scared or ashamed. We don’t know all of his emotions. But we do know that he is breaking

ranks with the group to which he belongs. With his Pharisaic friends he is breaking ranks. And he has to do this because there are questions burning in his heart and his mind that he cannot keep to himself.

It must have been hard to do. Wondering if anybody would see him associating as it were with the enemy. But he just has to do it. The questions are so strong within him. So he comes to Jesus. He finds Jesus at night. He speaks to Jesus. He admits to Jesus he has been watching him, listening to his preaching, watching his healing, hearing his teaching. And he says *"nobody can do these things unless God is present with you. But it's as if I can't find a way to fit you into my system. Yet I cannot deny that God is at work within you."*

So Nicodemus shares this observation with Jesus. And Jesus responds with his own statements and observations, and engages Nicodemus in discussion. And you would hope that at the end of the discussion that Nicodemus would fall down at the feet of Jesus and say "Now I know that you are my Lord and my Savior. I'm so glad I came to you and you have answered all my questions." But actually that's not how this encounter ends. In fact, if you look at verse 10 of John 2, that last verse about this first meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus, Jesus' last words to Nicodemus are not encouraging at all! Jesus does not put his hand on Nicodemus's shoulder and like a counselor and say something positive, like, "My son, my brother, I'm so glad you came. Let's talk more about this!" Rather, Jesus asks him a pointed question: "How is it that you don't understand? You are a religious leader in Israel and you don't get it?" . . . And that's the end of the conversation!! That's the end of this first conversation with Jesus. That's how it ends right there: "You don't get it! You don't understand. How is it that this is possible?"

But, fortunately, that's not the end of the story. There are two more incidents in John's gospel in which we meet Nicodemus coming to or speaking about Jesus, and what we come to see is that even though at first Nicodemus seems almost to be pushed away by Jesus, yet he keeps coming back in different ways: God at work, ongoing work, within his life.

The second time Nicodemus appears in John's account is in the 7th Chapter (vv. 45-52). This time it's not night. It's daytime and Nicodemus is on his own turf. He is with his own gang of folks, his colleagues in the movement of the Pharisees, and they are discussing Jesus. But there is nobody in the group who likes Jesus except for Nicodemus. In fact, all of Nicodemus's friends despise Jesus. Jesus is winning to his side all kinds of people who are listening to him. And they can't take this, they can't understand this. In fact, they are so angry with Jesus that they want to put him to death. He has stirred up anger in people. Some people love him but other people hate him. I mean really hate him. They want to put him to death.

And Nicodemus overhears this conversation . . . and you've been in this situation before, haven't you? . . . where somebody says something in your group and you don't agree with it, but you have to really decide if you are going to open your mouth and say something at that time or will you just zip your lip and keep quiet? We've all been in that kind of situation and there are times to zip the lip . . . but this time, Nicodemus decides that he has to say something. He says *"we're talking about the Law of Moses, the will of God here. And my reading of the Law says that you give a person a fair hearing! That's what the Law says."* And with this statement, Nicodemus's interest in Jesus is now out in the open. And his friends respond in a way that you could well imagine. They turn to him and say *"Are you from Galilee? Are you one of them? Read the Book. You will find there is no prophet who will come from Galilee."* And that's the end of the second story.

With this second incident, things have begun to change with Nicodemus. There's still no radical conversion. He has not fallen down dramatically at the feet of Jesus and said "My Lord, my Savior, my God!" But he has certainly moved a few steps out of his former circle and was willing to speak up publicly – which means that those questions he took to Jesus by night have not gone away, and that that conversation with Jesus, with Jesus' sharp ending question, somehow had left its mark upon his life. And his friends and colleagues know something too: that he is no longer quite one of them as he had been. Nothing radical though.

We come, then, to the third and final story. This third story of Nicodemus in John's Gospel is in the 19th Chapter, towards the end of the gospel. There are two more chapters to go. In this 19th chapter (vv. 39-41) we find Nicodemus doing something which is truly remarkable. Absolutely remarkable. All of Jesus' friends have left him (except some women who were followers) because Jesus has been taken away to be crucified. Jesus is hanging on a cross and he is dying on that cross, and then he is dead. And the question is "Well, what's next?" WE know the resurrection is going to come but his followers then do not: so, what's next, if anything? Where is the Christian family, the disciples? Where are Jesus' friends, and will they find courage to return?

Well there are only two 'friends' who appear in John's gospel at that point. One of them is a man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea, who is described as a 'secret disciple of Jesus.' And the other is our friend Nicodemus. Yes! Nicodemus is there at the cross, at the crucifixion of Jesus: when Nicodemus's friends wanted him dead (and they get their way) Nicodemus stands out, now quite apart from those people, and in a bold and courageous and loving move he actually spends his money and risks his reputation to be there – it's just Nicodemus and Joseph, the two of them, who are there taking Jesus' body down off the cross. This is how the story goes at verse 39 of John 19:

Nicodemus who had at first come to Jesus by night also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloe weighing about one hundred pounds [DR: which is probably what Jesus himself weighed. This is a huge lavish quantity, expensive]. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped him with the spices and linen cloths according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so because it was the Jewish day of preparation and the tomb was nearby they, Joseph and Nicodemus laid Jesus there.

There are no words. There don't have to be any words. It is clear that Nicodemus loves Jesus not only in his life but now, even in his death. He loves him and with tenderness he cares for him enough to risk his reputation, his money, everything.

And the journey, while not complete (it never is: we know actually that there is another stage because Nicodemus's remarkable courage and story is remembered among the early disciples: remembered enough to be told and told and told again, and to impact John so that he records it and you and I are able to hear it now), there is another stage after that – but the journey so far is remarkable *in that Nicodemus has now come to that place where it doesn't matter what other people think: **His relationship with this Jesus, dead or alive is something that he will do anything to maintain, whatever others think! He's completely made over. He's found, as it were, with Joseph of Arimathea a new family, a new group to belong to of which he is not ashamed or embarrassed. Life will never be the same again.***

I find Nicodemus' spiritual journey to be fascinating just as I find Malcolm Muggeridge's spiritual journey to be fascinating – watching it develop over time: it's almost as if John wants us to watch it develop, and to know that there was no instantaneous conversion! It's fascinating, but not only because of the development of the way Nicodemus's faith developed, *but fascinating because of the content of the first conversation that he has, Nicodemus has with Jesus in John Chapter 3. Fascinating because Jesus speaks to him there about a new birth. Fascinating because at least for the last one hundred years this new birth about which Jesus speaks to Nicodemus has been understood and portrayed as a one shot spiritual experience in which in a blinding flash of light our lives are changed forever. **But it doesn't happen that way with Nicodemus!*** In the very story where this birth is spoken of, this is not what happens to Nicodemus. Now isn't that jarring? Isn't this a disconnect? Yes! You must be born again. This is what Jesus says and commands! But there is no evidence (and John in his gospel has all the time in the world to give us the evidence), there is no evidence that there is a one shot blinding flash of light with Nicodemus in which his life is changed . . . his life is changed. But not that way!

And, indeed, the other jarring thing in this passage is that Jesus specifically says there is no one way for this to happen. The Spirit, remember what Jesus says about the Spirit? “*The Spirit (like the wind [it’s the same word, pneuma, in Greek]) blows where it wills. You don’t know where it’s coming or going.* Or, let me put it like this: when the spirit blows our lives will be changed and they need to be changed. And there is no question about it. We all need to be born again. Jesus is dogmatic about that. You *must be*, you *must be* born from above! You *must be* born again! But Nicodemus does not have what we would generally call a ‘born again experience.’

How are we to think about this? How are we to put this together? How are to understand this in the context of the scripture passage that we’ve just read? Well let me say a few things.

The first is this: that I have no doubt whatsoever that some people and some of you here today have had a dramatic spiritual experience with God – a dramatic experience with God which is powerful and life changing. Don’t get me wrong in this. I believe God works that way.

- Look at Isaiah Chapter 6 and Isaiah in the temple the profit and God coming to him in a powerful way and the angels are there and his life is changed as he falls down on the ground and says woe is me I’m a man of unclean lips. I live in a people of unclean lips. I don’t know what to do. I think I’m going to die and God lifts him up and cleanses him and changes his life.

- Or look at the apostle Paul in Acts Chapter 9 that speaks of what we call Paul’s ‘Damascus Road experience.’ On the road to Damascus, Paul, who would become the greatest missionary of the early church, is on his way to imprison Christians because he thinks they are blasphemers against God! He is on his way to do something awful in the name of God. But God through Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, stops him in his tracks, blinds him with a flash of light in which he sees the of glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Strikes him. He falls down. He asks, “who are you?” And a voice replies, saying, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you persecute. Rise up I’ve got a job for you to do.”

[DR: Out of interest, both of these experiences, with Isaiah and Paul, are technically ‘calls into service’, not just conversions from unbelief to belief, but calls into the service of God: life changing explosive calls to these people.]

- Or you might think of the crowd on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Thousands of people who could name the day in which they met God through Jesus Christ. They repented and they were saved. This happened on one single day as Simon Peter preached to them.

- And, then, I could tell you about myself. I haven’t seen any blinding, flashing spiritual lights, but in the summer of 1965 at a camp in the Highlands of Scotland at a little place called Kincraig, in a large tent, I heard the gospel preached and I made a decision to give my life to Jesus. I realized he loved me; that he wanted to forgive my sins and that he would be a friend who would never fail me or forsake me (Hebrews 13:5-6). And from that day to this he never has failed me or forsaken me. And I can point to that time when my life was made over: when the Spirit was at work dramatically.

But the point of our story is this, the point of Nicodemus is this and of course the point of Malcolm Muggeridge is this is that it doesn’t have to happen that way!

There are many people who love God-made-known-in Jesus Christ who simply cannot identify when such a change, a ‘falling in love,’ takes, place or when they were born again. There isn’t necessarily an identifiable time or a place. Remember what Jesus’ says? “*The Spirit blows where It chooses. You hear the sound of It but you do not know where It comes from or where It goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*”

So if the manner can vary from person to person, what do we really need to know about this new birth that Jesus says is inescapable? What is it that we need to know? Well I would say to you today that **it’s not how** it happens that matters. Jesus doesn’t really go into that with Nicodemus. Rather, it’s **what happens next** that matters. It’s what happens after you have been born that matters, that needs to be radical and life-changing.

Let me illustrate this by thinking about your first birth, because, surely, Jesus uses this description of 'new birth' because it must in some way be parallel to our first birth! So how does this second birth, this new birth from above by the Spirit, relate to our first birth?

I'm assuming, and this could be a big assumption, that all of us here today were born the first time, right? So this a fair assumption. We've all been born the first time! What I need to know from you all is how many of you remember the event? [LAUGHTER] So you don't remember it? . . . does that mean you haven't been born? I don't think so! I think I'll still hold with my assumption that you have all been born, and how do I know? Well, you are here today! And you are here today not just because you were born but because you were born *into a family*.

That family may have taken all kinds of different shapes. It could be a two parent family. It could be a single parent family. You could have been adopted. You may have grown up in some kind of an institution. But in some way shape or form in a happy or an unhappy functional or dysfunctional family you found yourself immediately in some kind of a community. Otherwise you wouldn't be here. The Romans would take their babies and put them outside, they would 'expose' them if they were unwanted, and, without family, without others, they would die. And others do it to this day. Without the family you would not live.

You have been born!! And the sign of it is that you came into a family which nurtured you and nourished you and which was an integral part of your growth which took place from that very first day and has continued until this day here. That's the sign, that's the memory, that's the knowledge that you were born in the flesh the first time round: it's very much linked with the fact that you now have or had a family.

And this is what's essential for the second birth too. Not our first family but a new family. A family in which by the Spirit of God we realize, as we have never realized before that we are children of God not merely by creation (though we all are), but by redemption we are children of the living God called into an intimate relationship with God, within God's family, within God's household with the brothers and sisters who are with us now, a relationship, thank God, that we can never escape and which nurtures us and nourishes us forever. Born into a family.

The apostle Paul, writing to the early Christians in Rome, doesn't mention the new birth explicitly, but he does in our passage of scripture (Romans 8) speak about 'adoption' – that you and I have been adopted into God's family (which is exactly the same kind of family imagery, isn't it?) by the power of the Spirit, into the family of God and the evidence, the evidence is not a spectacular experience. The evidence is that every single Christian – because you are not a Christian unless you have been born from above, born again, born anew of the Spirit. Jesus says you must be – every single Christian, by the power of the Spirit is able to speak to God as if God were their parent, their father, like a child in a relationship that nothing can take away.

"You have not been given the spirit of fear," says the apostle Paul, "but the Spirit of sonship (or of daughtership, of childhood) so that with your lips you now say in a way that is real 'Abba, daddy, father,' And whenever we say that and it's not merely rolling off our lips, when we say and it and when we believe it that is the most profound spiritual experience that you can have – it is, says Paul, the Spirit of God bearing witness with our own spirit that we are truly children of God! We are not alone! We will never will be alone. We are in a family in which God is our Heavenly Parent! We have been brought into a family, a kingdom, a realm from which nothing can separate us.

This is the evidence that you have been born a second time. And it's what God wants every single one of us to experience however quickly or slowly we get there. Whether the labor is longer or the labor is short; whether it's in hospital or at home it does not matter how it happens. But the fruit of it is to be the same with every single one of us.

I don't think it's an accident that the last time we meet Nicodemus he's doing something that family or close friends would do: caring for Jesus in his death, caring for his body. Can you

get any more intimate than that? He cannot escape the fact that he now belongs to a new community, and he is in love with this man to whom he came at first by night. Even in His death he is in love with Him. This is what we need to know. However quick or slow it may have been, or maybe you're still in the journey. It could be a light switch experience that turns the light on, just like that. Or it could be a dimmer switch experience, and the dimmer switch is still being turned up! But when God is at work we will come to that point, indeed Jesus urges us, with Nicodemus, to come to that point where we are born again into the family of God and we know that relationship and community that nothing will take away.

One quick final story. In my first congregation we had an evening service. At that evening service we had somewhere between zero and 15 people. Some nights it was just me. Actually there were always two of us: my wife played the organ. It was an iron-ore mining town. People were on shift work, and some of them couldn't come to morning worship for a number of weeks if they were on a specific shift. So we had this small evening service. And that night there were may have been three or four people there. It was a cold night and one person, a lady by the name of Brenda lingered after the service. And we began talking, she said to me "you know I'm just not sure that I'm okay with God or that God is okay with me." She was one of the finest Christian women that I've ever known in my life. And she began to speak about her uncertainty there, and I said Brenda "why are you so uncertain?" She said, "well, I look at or listen to all these TV or radio programs, and all these people have these amazing experiences. And I've never had one. And I turned to her and I looked her in the eye and I said "Brenda, you don't need to have it." And she looked at me and said, "Really?" I said "Yes, really!" And guess what? She had it right there and then. Her eyes lit up. They lit up. I can still see them: they lit up. And she left, and there was joy, there was singing in her heart that she had never known. Brenda, child of God.

You and I can be children of God forever by the spirit of God. Born into His family. Knowing a relationship with God that no one can take away anyone can take away. Claim it as your own!

Let us pray. Holy God we bow before You amazed at Your grace to us through Jesus Christ. Thank You for coming to us, for calling us into Your family, for calling us Your children by creation and by redemption. Bless us and make us a blessing in Christ's name, A-men.