

Sermon – March 5, 2023
“For God So Loved the World”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: John 3:1-17

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come and visit. Fill open hearts and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people, continuing our transformation into Christ's image, and leading us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! I hope that we are all finding ways to draw closer to God during the season of Lent. We are continuing to gather as a Charge on Thursday evenings at 6 pm for a time of prayer. I encourage you to come. We will be starting new Bible study material in the Tuesday night Bible study at Afton. We will be using the Epic of Eden, a study written by Sandra Richter. If you would like to take all of the Old Testament that you have been exposed to and find a way to order it and make sense of it, this study is for you. I will order books this week, so please let me know if you plan to attend. Based on last week's straw poll results at Fairfields, leadership has worked with the District to schedule a disaffiliation vote at Fairfields on March 27th at 5:30 pm. Please keep that date in mind and in your prayers. Please continue to pray for the children and volunteers at the Good News Club each Wednesday afternoon. Ask God to work in the hearts of the children and ask God to direct churches to invite children and their families who are accepting Jesus into the life of a congregation. And finally, we will meet here at Fairfields again this afternoon to pray. Please come if you are able and join with others as we pray for awakening to spread on college campuses and in communities.

In this morning's text, we find the coming of Nicodemus to where Jesus is at night and we might wonder, "Who is Nicodemus?" The text tells us he is a Pharisee, one who keeps the Law or Torah, and he is a leader of the Jews, possibly a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Israel, a role that most likely marks him an older man. Interestingly, Nicodemus as a Pharisee is not among those who lead the temple, a place Jesus has just cleared of the buying and selling of animals. This is an action that would have gotten the attention of those with authority over the temple, but since Nicodemus is a Pharisee, Jesus' action in the temple has likely pleased him and the Pharisees or at least raised their curiosity about who has done such an act. Jesus'

action will anger those in charge of the temple, but for a Pharisee, Jesus' action may have been seen as purifying the temple and could be part of why Nicodemus has come to talk with Jesus.

Notice that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. In John's Gospel, night is a reference to evilⁱ and Jesus, by contrast, is seen as or referenced to or associated with light. In John's Gospel, only one other person comes to Jesus by night, Judas, who comes under the cover of night to betray Jesus. The idea for Nicodemus is not so much that he is evil, but that he is coming out of the darkness of night to Jesus. Similarly, Jesus came to John for baptism and Nathaniel comes to Jesus to follow him. The action of coming to Jesus is a positive move towards belief. Don't miss that Nicodemus calls Jesus, "Rabbi." This is the address that Jesus' disciples use, and it may mark Nicodemus as one who is moving towards belief in Jesus. For those who have read ahead in John's Gospel, you already know that Nicodemus appears two more times, once at the Sanhedrin gathering where he attempts to give Jesus a hearing and at the tomb where he helps Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body down from the cross and place it in a tomb. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus comes to Jesus as one who has sought the kingdom of God by a strict keeping of the Law. Nicodemus comes to Jesus as one who thinks he is righteous. In a few weeks, we will look at another person, this time a woman, who also comes to Jesus. Her story is a "twin" to Nicodemus' story, but she will come to Jesus as a sinner.ⁱⁱ Both of the stories are about coming to belief in Jesus, one from the point of view of one who thinks he is righteous and the other from the point of view of one who thinks of herself as a sinner.

Notice that Nicodemus does not ask Jesus a question but makes a comment about the signs Jesus has done that no one can do apart from God. Nicodemus and those he represents are seeking answers about Jesus' ability to work these signs. The group of Pharisees Nicodemus represents understands that only God can do among people what is being done through Jesus. Nicodemus has come to gain understanding about who Jesus might be. Nicodemus has come out of the night, out of darkness, into the light that is Jesus. He has come seeking to learn more about who this worker of signs might be and how it is that Jesus can do signs only God can do.

If you are following along in your Bibles, let me encourage you to mark three statements in today's text. They are all truth statements from Jesus. They are typically identified by words such as "surely, surely" or "very truly" or "amen, amen" depending on your translation. In John's Gospel, there are 25 of these truth statements spoken by Jesus. In today's text we

encounter three of the 25. In the first truth statement, found in verse 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus how we are able to see the kingdom of God. We have to be born again, born from above, in order to see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus does not know what Jesus speaks of when Jesus speaks of being born from above. Nicodemus can only speak to the birth he knows, the birth that brings death. Those who are born of the flesh have the attributes of the flesh. Even believers who bring forth children bring forth a child born in sin who needs a savior.ⁱⁱⁱ Nicodemus, who has spent his life seeking righteousness by Law keeping, asks how one can repeat the birth of the flesh, the only birth he knows about. Jesus does not answer Nicodemus' question but shares a second truth statement found in verse 5, "Amen, amen, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."^{iv} I find no indication in the text that Nicodemus understands what Jesus has just told him about being born of water and Spirit. Jesus speaks no more to the water part of new birth but does speak to the idea of the Spirit that brings new birth within us, new birth that brings life in us, birth to our spirit. Some of us will be blessed to identify a moment when we accepted Jesus as our savior and experienced new birth. Our lives were changed and have never been the same. Others of us may not have had such a dramatic experience. Yet all of us are thirsting for an encounter with the Spirit. In John 7:37, Jesus tells the crowd, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" ^v All of those who follow Jesus are thirsting for more of the living water Jesus gives so that the Spirit might become a river flowing out of our hearts into the world. We are thirsting for the coming of the Spirit more fully or more completely so that we might not only be reborn from above but grow fully or be transformed more completely into the image of Jesus. Lent is a season of the Christian year when we should take time and ask ourselves and Jesus if there is anything in our flesh that is blocking us from receiving Holy Spirit in a manner that more fully satisfies our thirst. We seek to humbly come before Jesus and open ourselves to the touch of the Spirit on things in our flesh that block the Spirit and a more complete birth. Lent is a time in the Christian year when we seek to let Jesus speak into our hearts, touch our brokenness, and with his healing power, remove obstacles that we might be those who are born of water and Spirit and growing into the image of Christ. We seek to repent of those things of the flesh that block us from complete new birth, placing whatever Jesus identifies before God, repenting of what we hold and asking for forgiveness so that we might find healing, rebirth, and transformation of the Spirit,

allowing us to enter the kingdom of God. The idea of more complete birth may be better stated as a deeper work of God within us. I have heard these words many times in the last weeks as people seek to describe what has happened within them at Asbury as they met God powerfully there. They speak to the thirst they have for God to reach deep within their spirit and bring healing to brokenness that resides hidden in their inner being.

Entry into the kingdom of God comes from belief in Jesus, the only son of God, the Son of Man who is to be lifted up as the serpent was in the wilderness. The snake was lifted up then for the people to look on it so that they might not die from a snake bite. Jesus is lifted up so that we might believe in him and enter the kingdom of God. When we believe in Jesus as our savior, we are given eternal life. Eternal life is that which is born within us from the Spirit. Notice the words that tell us, “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.”^{vi} We should take note from these words of God’s priority of love for the world over the love of His son. Jesus likewise does not come to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

In Jesus’ teaching given to Nicodemus by night, we get our first indication of Jesus’ death on a cross for our sin. We are also alerted to our need for rebirth, new birth, or being born from above as a criterion for entering the kingdom of heaven. Rebirth, a changed life, a life with a new direction, is the greatest testimony we have been given to share with the world. We know who we were, those who were dead in the flesh, those whose works only brought death, those whose lives ended in ashes and dust. But with belief in Jesus, we have been born again. We have received what is born in us of the Spirit, eternal life. We have been transformed from those who are dead to those who live eternally through belief in Jesus. We can share what has occurred in our lives, testifying to the hope we have within, testifying to the rebirth we have experienced, testifying to the love of God we have experienced through the gift of his Son, and testifying to the transformation that our belief is bringing forth in our lives. Jesus came “not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”^{vii} We can share the love of God with others by sharing with them what Jesus has done for us and in us. We know the life we lived before we received new birth, and we are growing to understand more deeply the life we now live eternally through our birth from above. We can speak as only those who have been born of the Spirit can now speak, and we should speak to all who will listen, all who will ask us about the hope we now have in our hearts. Let us open our hearts to the Spirit and go to all the world

and share this great news that all who are thirsty may become rivers of living water flowing out of their hearts to others as they are reborn from above.

Pray with me: Jesus, we have been born of the Spirit and we give thanks and praise you for that gift. Give us words to speak to those who see within us hope that comes with new birth. Holy Spirit, transform us into rivers of living water. Jesus, open our hearts to anything that might block us from a life full of the results of our new birth and guide us to follow you into your mission to all of the world. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Go forth into Jesus’ mission.

ⁱ Ramsey Gospel of John

ⁱⁱ Burge, Gary M.. John (The NIV Application Commentary Book 4) . Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ramsey, Gospel of John

^{iv} NRSV John 3:5

^v NRSV John 7:37 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3209). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} NRSV John 3:16

^{vii} NRSV John 3:17