

Rev. Shannon J Kershner  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent – March 22, 2009  
John 3:1-21

### It's a Gift, Nick!<sup>1</sup>

Nicodemus was a major player in his town. He knew all the right people. He had all the right diplomas. He showed up and gave generously at all the right fundraising events for all the right causes. He was a major player his town of Jerusalem.

But the one activity that gave Nicodemus the most social mileage was his participation on the Sanhedrin Council. This council was a combination city council and Supreme Court, all rolled into one. It was composed of men just like Nicodemus-- good, solid, educated people. They were honored and respected within the city. Everyone knew that if you wanted to get something done in Jerusalem, it was wise to first get support from one of the Sanhedrin members. Then, the rest of the process was easy. Everyone who was anyone respected the members of the Sanhedrin Council. And our man Nicodemus was right at the top of that well-respected, well-admired list. Nicodemus was a major player in Jerusalem.

And his solid, well-honed reputation is why Nicodemus was a bit torn up that night. He had decided to go and see Jesus for himself. The name "Jesus" had been burning in his ears for days. After that day when Jesus turned over tables in the Temple, everyone on the Council had been talking about him—and not in glowing ways. So Nicodemus knew that if anyone saw him going to visit Jesus, then he, too, would be the subject of much discussion and rancor. And frankly, he was not in the mood to be a public spectacle. He had a reputation to uphold. A reputation it had taken years to earn and to hone.

"Maybe I should not even go," Nicodemus thought to himself as he waited for the sun to set and for the friendly darkness of night to take hold. But, he could not resist. For some reason, he felt drawn to this Jesus. The name "Jesus" had been burning in his ears for days. He had heard all of the stories and even seen some of the miracles first-hand. He had to go. So as soon as it was night, he quickly hurried down the road.

If Jesus was surprised to see Nicodemus, he did not register the surprise on his face. Instead, he stood up as soon as Nicodemus came through the door. Jesus waited patiently as Nicodemus tried to find the words to begin. It had been a long time since he, Nicodemus, had been the one asking for help or for explanation. These days, he was always the one to whom people came for advice and counsel. So, when he found himself standing in front of Jesus, he grew embarrassed. How could he ask about his growing sense of emptiness without appearing weak?

So, instead of asking Jesus a question, Nicodemus decided to make a statement. "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." Poor Nicodemus. If he had done more research, he might have figured out that it is not a good idea to tell Jesus what you "**know**" about him.

Jesus does not like being defined by our human categories. His feathers get a bit ruffled when people tell him what he can and cannot do, whom he can and cannot love, who he is and who he isn't. So when Nicodemus began his sentence with "We **know**," Jesus just let out a deep breath and let Nicodemus finish with his version of truth.

"You know, huh," Jesus responded. "Well Nicodemus, let me tell you something about what I know." Then Jesus started speaking about not being able to see the kingdom of God unless you were born from

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<sup>1</sup> I completely stole this title from one of my father's sermons as published in his book, All Are Chosen—Confessions of a Presbyterian Minister in Waco, Texas. Thanks Dad! Royalties are coming... HA!

above. And as Jesus offered this image, Nicodemus began to get flustered. This whole conversation was not going according to plan. Nicodemus had come up with his plan as he moved down the dark road that night. He would first tell Jesus what he knew about him. Then, he would ask Jesus some pretty concrete questions about some of the things he had seen Jesus do. Finally, if all that went well, Nicodemus would ask the real question he had for Jesus—the one that expressed how he just felt “off” lately, how he had this sense that there was something more, how it almost felt like he had this hole in heart that never seemed to mend, no matter how many different social activities he did, or how much money he made, or how well-respected he was in the community.

That was Nicodemus’ plan. And Jesus was messing it up with his confusing words about being born again or born from above or whatever he was saying. For instead of giving him answers, Jesus’ words were only causing more questions.

“I don’t understand what you are talking about,” Nicodemus stated. How on earth could you pull something like that off? He, himself, was no Spring chicken. He had children and grandchildren, many of whom were almost grown. His own physical body was slowing down. He felt creaks and aches in muscles he did not even know he had. Born again from above? How does one in his shape ever hope to do that? He could not even bend down to get something on the ground anymore without someone having to help him back up. How was he supposed to go and crawl back into his mother’s womb?

But Jesus did not seem to get frustrated by Nicodemus’ literalism. Because as soon as Nicodemus had walked through that door that night, Jesus had seen the way he was shackled—shackled by his certainty, shackled by his need for control, shackled by the way he had started to believe his own press about how amazing and powerful he was.

And so in the split second that it took for Nicodemus to open his mouth, Jesus had already decided that his job that night would be to set Nicodemus free from those shackles. He would set him free from his literalism. He would set him free from his narcissism. He would set him free from all that Nicodemus claimed to “**know**.”

Jesus was intent on taking this self-assured upstanding citizen into a new realm of possibility, a new way of construing the world, a new way of defining his life. Jesus was intent on helping Nicodemus discover more depth than he imagined possible. For that new birth into the world was the only thing that would mend that hole in Nick’s heart. So as soon as Nicodemus quieted down, Jesus piled on images, one right after another.

Water and spirit. Wind and flesh. Born again from above. Jesus wanted to show Nicodemus that all of this newness was not something that Nicodemus could do for himself, no matter how many diplomas he had on his wall. There was no recipe or formula for this new birth. It was like the wind that blows across your face from an unknown origin moving towards an unknown destination.

God’s Spirit was crazy and free. It blew where it wanted to, when it wanted to, changing the lives of all it touched. That was what set you free. That was what mended your heart. The wind did it. The Spirit did it. It just happened, even when you did not ask for it. One moment you are standing in the still night air, trying to figure out just what this Jesus fellow is talking about, and the next moment, the hair on the top of your balding head stands up as the wind rushes by and you sense a mystery you cannot understand.

And what was Nicodemus’ response to all of those piled-up images of possibility swirling around with the night air, wild and free? He just patted his hair back down and waited for the wind to stop. On that

night, he could not allow himself to see anything differently. He could not allow his imagination to run wild with Jesus' freedom. Nope. He had a reputation to protect. He had a status to keep. He had a world that was fairly orderly and contained.

"How can this be?" he asked, maybe even with obvious frustration. And I bet that Jesus wanted to smile, but he knew that it would hurt Nick's feelings if he did so. Nicodemus had walked through the door that night with a plan. But his plan was already starting to change. For now, his refrain had shifted from "we know," to "how can this be?" Jesus wanted to smile because the very fact that Nicodemus was even open to admitting confusion showed movement and a small loosening of the shackles.

"Look Nicodemus," Jesus said "I am just telling you what I have seen. I have seen old women in wheelchairs, captured by Alzheimer's, giggle and tap their feet when a song from the 40's begins to play. I've seen a drug addicted father/lawyer finally decide his wife and daughter were worth more to him than his next fix. I have watched a light ignite in the eyes of a cynical, burned out, forgotten about, dragged down, teenage boy, when he participated for the first time on Youth Sunday. Don't you get it, Nick? I've seen new birth take place daily in people and in places where no one would have imagined it."

Jesus continued, "I'm telling you God's got such a thing for this loused-up planet that God sent me down to be with you so that if you do not believe your own eyes, then maybe you'll believe mine, maybe you'll believe me, (3) so that you won't ever be so afraid again to tell me that you feel like you are empty and you have nowhere else to go except down a road at night in hopes of finding life."

We don't know how the conversation ended that night or when Nicodemus decided to go back home. I imagine that he left before the light of the sun started to shine. He was still Nicodemus, after all. But I also wonder if, as he walked back home, he reflected on Jesus' strange announcement that all of this new birth and new life and new possibility were gifts from God that he was free to open his hands and receive. Maybe he was so caught up in the beauty of it all that he did not even notice the wind picking up and his hair standing on end. Maybe he was so amazed by his encounter with Jesus that this time, he did not bother to pat it back down.

A while later, after Jesus had been crucified, Nicodemus decided to go with Joseph of Arimathea (also a member of the Sanhedrin) to help prepare Jesus' body for burial. It was probably not the wisest thing to do. For this time, it was in the middle of the afternoon. And the air was thick with threat. Even most of Jesus' disciples had fled the scene. But Nicodemus took the risk. He felt like he just had to do it.

And the next day, at the regular Sanhedrin Council meeting, the air was abuzz with conversation about Jesus again. Nicodemus listened attentively. And when he heard that some of the disciples had seen Jesus alive after his body had been placed into that sealed tomb, well, he became so flustered that all he knew to do was to excuse himself, lock himself in a bathroom stall, and weep tears of fear and joy, just like a newborn baby. (4)

(1) Ferris, Patricia. Christian Century, Jan 30-Feb 6, 2002. Page 19.

(2-4) All taken from Frederick Buechner's Peculiar Treasures. San Francisco: Harper Collins Press, 1979. Pages 137-138. I am indebted to his portrayal of Nicodemus for sparking a form for this sermon.