

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Sermon, March 5, 2023

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John 3:1-17

In the gospel lesson for today, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night. In the Gospel of John, this means that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in a state of ignorance, of not knowing or understanding who Jesus is, maybe not even wanting to know. But he does come to Jesus, so something good is going on.

What he does know is that Jesus has done some miracles. He says “We know you are from God because no one can do the miracles you have done apart from God.” He knows about miracles such as the miracle of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turns a huge amount of water into the richest, sweetest, most potent wine. This shows us what God is like, that God loves a party, and that God is ridiculously, extravagantly, embarrassingly abundant.

So, Nicodemus knows the miracles, and wants to find out more.

I think sometimes we are like Nicodemus. There is a whole lot that we don’t know or understand about God and Jesus. But we’ve heard that Jesus has done some miracles in someone’s life, or seen him do them in our own. We’ve heard someone say that with God’s help, they have stayed sober for five years, when they had been enslaved to alcohol for twenty-five years. Or we might hear someone tell us that God helped them through a time of particular financial or emotional hardship. We hear about these things and want to find out more.

Jesus does not seem to respond to Nicodemus, however. Instead, Jesus comes up with this off the wall statement from the upper stratosphere. “Truly I tell you, no one

can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born from above,” or, “born again.” The Greek word there, *anōthen* can mean either “from above” or “again,” and probably, here, means both.

Nicodemus takes Jesus’ teaching literally. This happens a lot in the Gospel of John. People take Jesus’ teachings literally when Jesus means them figuratively. This leads to controversy sometimes. Almost no one takes the whole Bible literally, and almost no one takes the whole Bible figuratively. So, what parts do we take literally and what parts, figuratively? We disagree and discuss about that, which is okay.

But here, Jesus is not speaking literally. Nicodemus says, “Can a person go back into the mother’s womb and be born again?” No. Jesus is speaking figuratively. He says, that we must be born “of water and the Spirit.”

Now, a bit of an aside here. In this passage, Jesus is using a feminine image for God. What kind of a person gives birth? A female person. Jesus is talking about the Spirit giving birth to us, a feminine image for the Holy Spirit. Scripture gives us feminine images for all three members of the Holy Trinity. Also, masculine, as we know. But back to the sermon. Jesus says we must be born of water and the Spirit. In other words, it’s not about the miracles. Miracles are wonderful. God can do wonders in your life, and those wonders can show us what God is like. But the wonders are not the point. The point has to do with the fact that, in Jesus, we are reborn. We are made new.

Nicodemus says, “How can these things be?” I’m kind of feeling the same way, here. I’m going “Huh?” Then Jesus goes on into a bit of a sermon where he says that no one knows God except him, who has come from God, and then he shows God to us. So, if you want to find out what God is like, look at Jesus. Then Jesus tells us what God is like, just like he will eventually show us. He says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who believe in him might not perish, but might have eternal life.”

That’s the point. We are reborn into God’s love, which comes to us in Jesus.

So, maybe I can tell you about a person I knew briefly, in order explain my point.

My wife Thyne and I arrived at Carol Gray’s house in the early afternoon. Carol had been forgetting to feed her cat, Lucy, or to clean the litter box, so she had decided to

offer Lucy to a new home. Carol showed us around her apartment. It was beautiful. She showed us the painting of her husband Lou. He was playing the string bass, because he had played string bass in a jazz band.

Carol had taken care of her husband as he had died of Alzheimer's. They had loved the house they lived in, but as Lou's abilities faded, it became clear that Carol wasn't as sharp as she used to be either. So they moved into Treyton towers, and Carol took care of Lou.

Here was a woman who cared for her husband as he died of Alzheimer's, even as her own memories and mental abilities had begun to fade. And guess what she said every morning when she got up? She said, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

A lot could be said about the miracles that did not happen in Carol's life, the ways in which God had not helped her through. And yet, she still trusted that God was with her, that God's love wins.

We see Nicodemus two more times in the Gospel of John. First, he stands up for Jesus when the council is trying to get him crucified. He's not a coward any more. He doesn't hide at night any more. Second, again, he is brave, he has grown. He goes with Joseph of Arimathea to ask Pilate for Jesus' body, thus associating himself with a convicted rebel, a terrorist. Then he brings a hundred pounds of expensive spices to put on Jesus' body. Now, Nicodemus is ridiculously, preposterously, embarrassingly abundant in his love for Jesus.

This is the point: we are reborn into Jesus' love, whether we have miracles to tell about or not. Whether we have understanding and knowledge or not, God loves the world. God loves you. And there is a resurrection coming. Thanks be to God.