

## **Yes, But How?**

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

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be back with you all this morning. We had a wonderful time in Minnesota, but we sure missed all of you. Having had a last week off from preaching, I was feeling a little rusty when it came time to sit down at my desk and write a sermon this week. I was considering letting ChatGP write my sermon for me. Have people heard of chat ChatGPT? It's a generative artificial intelligence software that's free and available to anyone online. It is one of several examples of generative AI. These are tools that allow users to enter written prompts and receive new human-like text or images and videos generated by the AI. You can ask questions or to "write something for you" -like, "Can you write me a 2,000 word sermon on belief?" It seemed disingenuous to let a chatbot do my work for me, but I decided to let it write the opening joke. "Why don't Mennonites play sports? "Because when things get tough, they quilt!" Get it? Get it?

In the text that Carrol read for us this morning, we meet Nicodemus. A pharisee, a Jewish religious leader. Jesus' teachings and miracles are causing quite a stir in the Jewish faith community which Nicodemus is a part of. At the end of chapter two, just before our text for this morning, Jesus is at the temple during passover season (it's likely that Nicodemus would have been there too), and in a fit of righteous anger and

justice, Jesus drives the people selling animals and the money changers from the temple, shouting that they've turned a holy place of God's welcome into a place of capitalism. When confronted by the Pharisees and asked about what gives him the right to do such things. Jesus says, "I'll show you, destroy this temple and I'll rebuild it in three days!" The Pharisees are incredulous about this statement, about his behavior, about everything that they have heard! This man is unstable and his actions are upsetting the carefully ordered ways of Jewish religious life, as they see it.

Yet for Nicodemus, and likely others too, underneath the outrage there is also some sense of intrigue. Sure, they witnessed his behavior in the temple, but they've also heard and seen some miracles. A man they've known to be paralyzed for years is walking through the temple entrance one way. His name is everywhere. How could he do these things if he wasn't from God? Nicodemus was curious, eager to know more about Jesus, but how can he find out more without raising eyebrows. There was no way to ask the questions he wanted to ask without jeopardizing his position. So, a clandestine meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus is arranged, under the cover of darkness. There, Nicodemus says to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him." What's interesting here is that Nicodemus doesn't lead with a question, or even a posture of curiosity. He's making a statement. Jesus, I've got your number, I understand who you are and what you're up to. Nicodemus' approach to Jesus feels conflicting, especially in that Nicodemus is often portrayed as a seeker, a Pharisee, ready to defect to the other side. One of the commentaries that I read this week on this

passage said that Nicodemus comes to Jesus looking to have his own suspicions, his own beliefs about Jesus confirmed. He wants answers, certainly, but he's wanting Jesus' answers to align with what he already thinks.

And Jesus, in his characteristic fashion, not only doesn't answer Nicodemus' question, he throws one right back at him, "'I assure you, unless someone is born anew,[a] it's not possible to see God's kingdom.'" Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, you're seeing it, you're seeing me, the miracles, the authority, but are you getting it? Are you ready to have your understanding of the kingdom of God expanded? Are you ready for a different outlook, a deeper faith?" But Nicodemus doesn't hear that, he stays within his own framework of understanding. "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?" Rather than continuing to lead Nicodemus along slowly, Jesus then lays out the whole thing for him. He speaks of baptism by water and the Spirit, of how the Spirit blows people where God wishes them to go." It's an invitation to consider something new, for Nicodemus to shift his beliefs, to faithfully step into new possibilities.

And what does he reply, "How are these things possible?"

Jesus' frustration, in joy, in whatever he may be feeling offers the grand vision of God's plan to Nicodemus, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things? I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you don't

believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Human One. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One[d] be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son."

The encounter ends there. We don't know if Nicodemus got it, if he kept asking irrelevant questions or if he walked away from the whole business. That's left to our imaginations, but what I'd like us to talk about together this morning is the matter of beliefs, and how what shapes our journey with God.

First, I just want to say that I can really empathize with Nicodemus; Jesus's words in the gospels often feel cryptic. And Nicodemus is looking for answers, not more questions. Nicodemus wants a clear answer, steps to ensure he is holding the "right, correct" beliefs about who Jesus is and what he is up to. I've certainly longed for more clarity from God in my role as a Pastor. I was reading an article this week that was aimed at pastors, reminding us that our "job" so to speak is simply to open up space in our relationships and in our congregations to work. We don't have to "do the work", but instead make room for the Holy Spirit to minister. I immediately thought, "Yes! Great! This resonates with me and how I would like to pastor", and my next immediate thought

was, “But how?” How exactly do I do that? Where are the clear step by step instructions on how to “open up space”? Wait, what does that even mean? There are so many instructions in the Bible, most especially in the gospels and the epistles where we respond with, “Yes, but how?” So, as much as we can from a distance shout, “Nicodemus! Don’t you get it!?”, I think on some level we all want clear answers. It would be nice if believing in Jesus and all that goes with it was tidy, clear, and settled. I once heard a Mennonite Therapist in Winnipeg talk about how often her clients who had experienced trauma or abuse in their lives and were feeling ready to go back to church would often choose congregations that had clear leadership structures, and clear sets of beliefs and behavioral expectations. She wondered if that was because those sorts of churches offered a sense of comfort and stability. Perhaps that’s what Nicodemus came to Jesus with, the hope that Jesus would offer the kind of faith structure that Nicodemus was used to, as a faithful keeper of the Jewish. Perhaps he wanted stability. And when Nicodemus asked again and again, “Yes, but how? How are the things you’re talking about possible?” Jesus drew him further away from stable beliefs and further into relationships of trust and of risky faith.

The kind of Faith that Jesus called Nicodemus to, and calls all of us too, is fundamentally unsettling. I don’t mean unsettling in an unnerving way, you know, like when a Pastor tells a joke that’s written by artificial intelligence, but I mean unsettling in that it takes the places and spaces in our hearts and lives where we have anchored ourselves and asks us to step out into somewhere new, with Jesus as our guide.

Let's turn to another passage from the lectionary this morning to help how this unsettling faith often looks. This is from Genesis 12:1-4, "Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him." A short passage, but say a lot about faith.

First, the faith that Jesus is talking about asks for trust; trust that God will do what God says, trust that God is faithful in keeping his promises, even when it seems impossible. In just those few short sentences, God promised Abram a few impossible things: A new land, location to be determined. Make you a great nation, that is, give you many descendants, even though your wife is not able to conceive. I'm going to bless the whole EARTH through you, though this one man. Sounds beautiful! Amazing! And completely impossible by any human measure. And to this audacious set promises, this unbelievably big ask of complete trust, Abram says, "Yes!" Not, "Okay, yes, but how?", but an enthusiastic YES. And, Abram, or Abraham as he was later called, is written throughout the Bible as a "father of our faith" or a "here of our faith." Faith in Jesus calls for complete trust.

Secondly, how we show or how we respond to Jesus' ask is through action. How we respond to Jesus' ask is through action. "And Abram went, as the Lord had told him."

Abram packed up his entire household and set out to this place, wherever it might be, that God would show him. Belief in Jesus can never simply be on a mental level, never be a concept or a thought exercise, belief in Jesus asks us to follow where Jesus calls us, asks us to submit ourselves to Jesus as our guide, and rather than asking more questions to respond with actions. When I was in the VERY early days of considering pastoral ministry, long before I applied for any roles, or even really told anyone about the idea, except for Cindy Wallace (who was the one who planted the idea), Cindy told me about a Quaker method of discernment. Basically, when you sense God leading you in one direction, or that you need to make a change or something like that, you just walk through the first “door”. And if the next door in that journey opens up, you walk through that one too. The idea being that you just keep walking forward and through the door until you find one that is closed, trusting that God is on the other side of each open door. I remember how deeply that idea resonated with me at the time. I didn’t need to see the big vision. I didn’t need to wonder if the open door was the right one, or maybe I was making a mistake, simply to act, by walking forward until God said, “that’s enough. We’ll stop here.” In the Nicodemus story, Jesus is asking Nicodemus to act on his belief that he is the Son of God, but he isn’t ready for his belief to change his life.

Finally, as deeply unsettling as faith in Jesus often is, we can be reminded that at the core of this Faith is the deep and abiding love of God. It’s telling that in Jesus conversation with Nicodemus, where Nicodemus just wants more and more answers, some clear proof that Jesus is who he says he is, that Jesus says this in his speech to Nicodemus with these words, “ God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so

that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him." Jesus reminds Nicodemus, and us, that God loves us. Deeply, wholly and sacrificially. And when we see this as the core of Jesus' message and his identity than trusting him becomes that much easier, when we know that our God is motivated by love and life. Isn't that message worth trusting? A belief worth hanging your hat on?

In closing Friends, Nicodemus's encounter with Jesus shows us that belief is not static, it requires openness and action. Faith in Jesus means trusting the impossible, acting in faith, and anchoring ourselves in the love of God. Let's pray that this Lent season we are unsettled by the Good News of Jesus Christ. Amen.