

Lent 2A 2023 John 3:1-16

I won't ask you to recite from memory what is arguably the most famous bible verse that we find in John's gospel today, but I bet if I did ask, many of you could. Even if you were not a regular church go-er, If you have ever watched a sporting event on TV, or looked under your windshield wiper after parking your car at some big event, or driven where there are billboards, yard signs, or bumper stickers, you've likely seen the citation, *John 3:16*. Do you think unchurched people go look it up when they see it spray painted somewhere for the first time, or if that's even the intent of the people who make the signs? A colleague of mine always used to insist that it doesn't matter if you know verse 16 by heart if you don't also know verse 17 by heart. I know *you* know verse 17 just as readily as verse 16, but it is printed in the bulletin there, just in case you draw a blank. Both verses are, like all scripture, best understood in context.

Nicodemus has sometimes been portrayed as coming to test Jesus, but he seems more like an honest seeker who wanted to understand Jesus better. He visits under the cover of darkness, but it's unclear whether he wants to hide the meeting from the other Pharisees or the crowds at large. Since he starts out by saying "Rabbi, *we* know you are a teacher sent by God..." he could have been an emissary of the Pharisees, the *we*, or he could have come all on his own. John doesn't tell us—or how this scene ends; after Nicodemus' astonishment and Jesus' lengthy explanations, John moves on to the next scene and we never hear how Nicodemus' night ended. But we do know that he moved beyond his initial confusion to respect, admiration, and even discipleship. Nicodemus is the one who reminds the other Pharisees that the Law requires a trial before they can judge Jesus, even though they then accuse him of being a sympathizer; and after the crucifixion, Nicodemus brought 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe to embalm Jesus' body. This meeting, along with other meetings John alludes to but doesn't describe, changed his life.

Unfortunately, Nicodemus is not usually remembered for his transformation but as sort of a stand-in for all the Pharisees who should have immediately recognized Jesus as the Son of God and followed him, but who were too narrow-minded to figure it out or too power-hungry to become disciples. It is vital that we not read Nicodemus' astonishment or the Pharisees hard-heartedness as a criticism of Jews and Judaism but that we remember to always substitute ourselves for the Pharisees in these stories; the Pharisees were making an honest go of living out God's Law the best way they understood it—which ought to be how we approach our baptismal calling. If you don't like thinking of yourself as a Pharisee, please remember pastors are like the Priests or Scribes, and the gospels reserve special criticism for them.

We hear Jesus tell Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom of God he has to be born again, which probably sounds to us a lot like being baptized. Nicodemus is a little baffled by this metaphor, but so might we be if we were hearing it for the first time and that “born again” language wasn’t so much a part of our Christian vocabulary. What Jesus is *not* talking about is baptism as a ticket for admission, a sacrament, or a once and done quick fix—an easy answer he can give to Nicodemus so he goes home with the mystery solved. Yes, we celebrate baptism as a sacrament, and yes, one baptism is sufficient, and yes, we speak of it as our entrance into the church and eternal life, but only in the sense that it is a beginning—a beginning of life-long transformation. Jesus likens entrance into the kingdom of God to birth because birth is not a quick and easy thing—so I gather—and it is just the beginning. The life of everyone associated with a birth changes forever after it.

Being born from above isn’t just a rite of passage or box to be checked; the renewal of baptism is the beginning of a life patterned after Jesus’ way of being in the world. This is what it means to enter the kingdom of God—not getting into heaven after this life is all over, although we have that promise, too—but living as citizens in the kingdom of God on earth, a God whose Son healed the hurt, fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, and washed the feet of disciples, even disciples who were on the verge of denying, betraying, and abandoning him. It’s in describing this kingdom living to Nicodemus that Jesus speaks his famous words: *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* and his not quite so famous words *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*. In John’s gospel, belief is not about intellectual assent; it’s not about reciting the Apostles’ creed and agreeing with all the claims it makes; and it’s definitely not about using John 3:16 as some kind of password to check who is saved. And salvation in John’s gospel isn’t about avoiding hell after we die. For John, belief is always about trusting Jesus such that we live like him; salvation is about not being separated from God but living in communion with Jesus and all God’s people. A whole bunch of us living like Jesus is, in a sense, what saves our world from being hell on earth.

Nicodemus might have gotten off to a rocky start, but he did live into the kingdom of God; we see it when he sought justice for Jesus amidst the angry religious mob; we see it when, with no regard for his own reputation, he honored the disgraced remains of an innocent man who had been executed by the state. We live in a world of condemnation, but it’s not God’s condemnation. How are we being called to kingdom living in this world that God so loves?