

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 03/05/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Second Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, March 5th

John 3:1-17

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The path to discipleship

The Gospel lection for the second Sunday in Lent is from the Gospel of John and contains undoubtedly the most famous verse in the Bible. Indeed, there is a tendency to rush through the earlier part of this passage in our eagerness to get to John 3:16 and thus divorce this well-loved verse from its original context. The focus here is on these earlier verses and what Nicodemus can teach us about our own path to discipleship.

John 3:1-17 Commentary

According to Barclay, the format for this text follows a pattern common to this Gospel whenever Jesus had conversations with seekers: The seeker says something (v.2). Jesus responds in a way that is hard to understand (v.3). The seeker misunderstands what was said (v.4). Jesus responds with something that is even harder to understand (v.5). A discourse and explanation then follow.¹

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

The opening sentence establishes three things about Nicodemus. First, he is named. Typically, significant characters in John's Gospel are unnamed (the woman at the well, the man born blind). Perhaps Nicodemus is named because of his prominence. Second, he is a Pharisee and thus one of only six thousand committed to living out every detail of the Law.² Third he is "*a ruler of the Jews*" and thus a member of the Sanhedrin which numbered only seventy. Nicodemus was thus a very prominent person. He comes to Jesus at night. Night would be a good time to find Jesus alone. Night would also be a good time to meet Jesus without attracting attention to himself. This Gospel attaches symbolism to night and darkness (see 1:5; 3:19-21 as examples). Such a prominent individual respectfully addresses Jesus as "*Rabbi*" (Teacher). The signs that Jesus had performed had clearly drawn Nicodemus to Jesus. In the same way, John states his purpose of writing His Gospel as follows:

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. [John 20:30-31]

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1, rev. ed., (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 124.

² *Ibid.*, 120.

Apparently Nicodemus was not the only Pharisee who recognized Jesus was working through God's power: "we know..." (v.2).

³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Jesus ignores Nicodemus' reference to the signs and responds quite abruptly with significant statements ("Truly, truly..."). Jesus explains the need for change to one's inner life achieved by a spiritual rebirth through the power of the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus is still focused on the literal and not the metaphorical.

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

The final words of Nicodemus in this passage show him to still be confused. Jesus now addresses Nicodemus as *the* teacher of Israel. How is that you, the great teacher of Israel, do not understand these things? Jesus illustrates how we speak about what we know (cf. v2) and what we see. Nicodemus' understanding was incomplete. How can Nicodemus understand heavenly things if he still does not understand earthly things? Jesus then establishes his authority to be speaking about heavenly things (see also 1:1; 1:3; 1:9-10; 1:14; 1:18).

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus now answers Nicodemus' question from v.4: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Looking upon the fiery serpent lifted up on a pole gave life to those bitten by a serpent in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4-9) just as belief in Christ crucified on the cross gives eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

This is the most famous summary of the Gospel. It is connected to v.15. In order for v.15 to be possible, v.16 had to happen. This verse tells us the initiative lies with God. It tells us specific action was taken by God - *gave his only Son*. It tells us this was done out of love. It tells us the extent of God's love - *the world* rather than just Israel. It tells us the condition necessary - belief in Christ. It tells us the outcome of such belief - having abundant life beginning now as a taste of what will be fully experienced later - spending eternity in the presence of God. The final verse of the text is best understood in the context of v.18f. It illustrates how Christ was not sent (first coming) to condemn the world - the world is already condemned - but in order to save the world.

Reflections

The final words of Nicodemus in this passage show him to be still in a state of confusion. Was Nicodemus a believer at this point? Jesus often bewildered the people He ran into - the woman at the well (4:1-42), the man

born blind (9:1-41). Perhaps bewilderment is our first reaction too. But eventually Nicodemus, the woman at the well and the man born blind were all brought to faith in Jesus. The process was faster in some than others. For the woman at the well it took only one conversation.

The next we hear from Nicodemus is when he speaks up for Jesus in front of the chief priests and Pharisees:

⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ⁵¹ "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" ⁵² They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." [7:50-52]

Some may view Nicodemus' actions here as a relatively weak defense of Jesus. However, in the first mention of Nicodemus he came to seek out Jesus at night. Now he is publicly defending Jesus in front of his colleagues apparently in broad daylight.

The next and final time we hear of Nicodemus is during the burial of Jesus:

³⁸ After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. ³⁹ Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. [19:38-40]

In the above verses, it is reasonable to conclude that Nicodemus was, by now, also a disciple of Jesus due to his association with Joseph of Arimathea.

Perhaps many of us can relate to Nicodemus. We are drawn by the Spirit to seek out Jesus. At first, we are more confused since what we know about the world is turned upside down. As the Spirit works within us, we move both farther and further down the path of belief and discipleship. While some of us may have a one-time life-changing encounter like the woman at the well, others may have a longer, less dramatic experience. For some of us, our new life may involve instantaneously rushing back to our village and sharing the Good News of Christ with everyone - like the woman at the well. For others, our path may be more akin to Nicodemus.

John's Gospel is clear about being born again - about being spiritually transformed. Before we inflate our own role in this process, just like the first time we were born, it had little to do with us! We simply lived when we were born. Similarly with our spiritual rebirth, it does not end here - we are accountable for how we live as disciples.

Application

Jesus invites Nicodemus to be open to the rushing of God's Spirit so that his very personhood is renewed. Without this openness and trust to let the Holy Spirit move, Nicodemus would not be able to see beyond the blinkers of his existing assumptions and worldview of his tradition.

- To what extent are your existing assumptions and traditions about church and Christianity hindering the rebirthing process?
- To what extent are you trying to keep God in a human-constructed box?
- Where is Spirit of God rushing in your life at this moment?
- Does the prospect of a revival or spiritual awakening cause you to be afraid?