

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**February 5, 2023**

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**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Clarksburg, WV**

**John 3:1-17**

*There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. (John 3:1 N.R.S.V.)*

## Nicodemus

I have heard it said that everyone is the hero of his or her own story. I suppose that is true for me too. We all have certain things that are central to our character and identity. These are the things that make us unique, that make us who we are and not someone else. Who are you? What makes you the person you are?

If anyone had a reason to be proud of their standing in life, it was me. In my time there were about 300 million people living on the earth. Out of all those people God chose the Jews as his special people. There were maybe 500,000 Jews living at the time and I was one of the those chosen few.

Of all of the Jews there were a chosen few who became pharisees. We were the educated ones. We studied the law day and night and did our best to follow it. Of the 500,000 Jews, there were perhaps 6,000 who were pharisees. I was one of those chosen few.

Of the Sadducees and Pharisees 70 were chosen to serve on the Jewish high court that we called the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the supreme court for religious authority. And I was on the Sanhedrin. I was one of the chosen few.

Of the 70 members on the high court, only three were chosen as officers of Sanhedrin. I was one of those three. My title was "The Teacher." The whole council looked to me when matters required extra wisdom or breadth of experience. I was one of the chosen few.

I was honored and humbled to serve in this capacity. Still, that was not what I was most proud of in myself. The thing I most took pride in was my ability to understand people, to understand what was at stake, to get to the heart of the issues by carefully thinking them through.

That is what first hooked me into listening to Jesus. I couldn't figure him out. He spoke with authority and saw no need to quote other ancient authorities to bolster his arguments. He simply stated things as if he were the only necessary authority on the subject. It was baffling because I could see the truth in much of what he said. It was mystifying because he knew things that a simple traveling preacher had no way of knowing.

Who was this guy? He intrigued my professional pride. I wanted to figure him out and I was going to do just that. It's who I am.

I had listened to Jesus when he preached in public, but I needed more. I needed some one-on-one time with this compelling individual. So I arranged to meet with Jesus at John's house in the middle of the night.

Much ink has been spilled over the years about why I wanted to meet with Jesus at night. People have speculated that I was afraid of being seen talking to Jesus. Others have seen this as a metaphor for my spiritual blindness. The answer was much simpler than that.

During the daytime, Jesus was always surrounded by crowds of people. You can't have an in depth conversation with someone when other people are constantly interrupting. Beyond that, people let their guard down at night. At night, gathered around the fire, most people will be more relaxed so that you can see their true self. And I had the feeling that I was going to need all the advantages I could get to figure this Jesus out.

It was midnight by the time I finally got free of my other responsibilities and made it to John's house. I was invited right inside without a fuss. Jesus was still up, waiting for me. So far things were going as I had planned them.

As the senior teacher and the one with the most rank, I opened the conversation graciously. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come for God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Yes, there was a bit of harmless flattery in that statement. We, in the sense of the Sanhedrin, were not at all in agreement that Jesus was from God. But I hoped that the approval of such an esteemed teacher as myself, would make him less defensive, more likely to open up to me.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Suddenly, in spite of all my intelligence and hard earned wisdom, I was adrift. Where was he going with this? Was he questioning my spiritual sight or was he just off the wall? I was aware that the word he used for "born from above" could also mean "born again." So I decided to play dumb.

What do you mean about being born again? Can a man enter his mother's womb a second time?

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'"

The wind chose that moment to shake the door of the house. In the silence that followed Jesus continued. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

What in the world did that mean? My mind was running in 100 different directions and none of them made sense. He seemed to be claiming to be God on earth. "How can these things be," I muttered?

Then he said, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet do not understand these things?”

Now what did that mean? Was he mocking me? Did he really just say, “You are so smart, you are stupid?” Or was there some deeper message I was missing. When had I lost control of this conversation anyway?

Jesus went on to say that the only one who could reveal the truth was the one who came down from heaven. And that just like Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Looking back on this conversation years later, it all made perfect sense. But in the moment, nothing made sense. It was all surreal. The individual words made sense, but I still had no idea what he was talking about.

I remembered that weird story about Moses and the Hebrews in the wilderness. I was a Bible scholar. I knew every story in scripture. The Hebrews were being bitten by poisonous snakes and dying. God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Those who were bitten by the snakes were told to look on the bronze serpent. And when they did, they were healed and did not die.

In spite of the fact that I was one of the smartest men alive, and I say that with all humility. In spite of the fact that I had been highly educated and versed in scripture and interpretation, I was always baffled by that bronze serpent story. It sounded suspiciously like idol worship to me. And now this Jesus was quoting it.

It was at that point that I finally gave up. I quite trying to force things to make sense and just listened to what Jesus was saying. And it was as if a curtain had been pulled back.

Jesus said, “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. 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.”

I always considered myself to be a seeker. I was a seeker of truth, always pressing on, never satisfied. Up to that point I had always believed that truth could only be found by intellectual effort. But this insight was a revelation. It was a gift.

More understanding would come later after Jesus’ death and resurrection. But the understanding I was gifted with that day is this: “God loves the world. God loves you and me. God is not out to condemn the world but to save it.”

Imagine that?! All this time we pharisees had been telling people that God was out to get them, that God was angry with them. That they better get their act together before they got zapped. But this was completely different. God is not out to get you. God is out to save you.

Something burst within me that night and I wept like a child. And that was okay too. For I knew that I was in the presence of God and more than that, I knew the love of God in the most profound sense.

It was wonderful. If you have never experienced God's love, ask him to show it to you. There is nothing that God wants to do more, than to show you his love.

Amen.