

Second Sunday in Lent

NEWBORNE

John 3:1-17

Second Sunday in Lent

Analysis by James Squire

1Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.
2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The 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." 9Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have

eternal life. 16“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. 17“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.

DIAGNOSIS: Dead Blind

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Lights on, Nobody at Home*

Right off the bat, Nicodemus is in trouble. He sneaks away from his brethren to meet secretly with Jesus. Notice that he did not rendezvous with Jesus just to pay him a compliment. He was clearly looking for something from Jesus. Jesus pegs this as “see[ing] the kingdom of God,” and Nicodemus does not deny it. It is likely that Nicodemus wants to see it for himself before he decides to openly betray his loyalty to his fellow Pharisees. He doesn’t want to give up the life he knows unless he can see for himself that it will be worth the sacrifice. But Jesus is not a used car whose tires you can kick and whose hood you can look under and inspect.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *In the Dark*

As the evangelist describes in his prologue, Nicodemus walks in darkness because he doesn’t know the Truth. The fact that he comes to Jesus secretly indicates that his community perpetuates that darkness. They call such darkness “light” and say that it is Jesus who walks in darkness. Yet Nicodemus tells Jesus “we know” that he is a teacher who has come from God. But just who exactly is this “we”? Is Nicodemus on shaky ground here as well? He senses that his present loyalty is deficient somehow, but he can’t replace his faith in the Sanhedrin with faith in this mysterious Jesus. He is stuck in his unfaith.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Unbearably Blind

As he quips to Jesus, “I can’t re-enter my mother’s womb!” Strange as his complaint was, it’s dead-on: he is helpless to do what Jesus says must be done. But that is not a problem for Jesus. It is a problem for Nicodemus. A small part of him wants to be born into this new thing called “water and Spirit,” assuming Jesus is all He says he is. But Nicodemus cannot pull it off. “How can these things be,” he asks rhetorically. But according to Jesus, Nicodemus has no one to blame for this but himself. He should know better, because what Jesus “testifies to” should be plain as day to a “teacher of Israel.” The light has shone in his darkness, but Nicodemus is “blind” to it and still cannot see. He is overcome by the darkness.

PROGNOSIS: New Born and Wide Eyed

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Borne Anew

Once again, Nicodemus, you should have known that “no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” Of course you can’t pull it off! No one can. Neither could your ancestors overcome the snake bites in the wilderness. What you should have known is that the whole positive, can-do attitude about entering the kingdom of heaven is a crock. It always has been and it always will be. That fateful day in the wilderness, it took Moses lifting up the serpent to heal them. Today, it takes the Son of Man himself being lifted up on the Cross to heal you. What saves you is something that you cannot do. The Son of Man has come to accomplish it for you and in you. That is how you are to be born(e) from above. “I will go through the death for you, and bring you along for the ride. In my hands you will be born of water and Spirit, and you will see the kingdom of heaven,” says Jesus.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Wide Eyed

For those of us who try so hard to believe in Jesus, who “know” that Jesus is a great teacher from God, who want some intangible unknowable thing to happen to make us believe, the Good News begins by surrendering to the Son of Man who carries us through this dilemma. We know in our heads – as surely Nicodemus knew in his head – that belief and trust do not come about by our own exertion but by the touch of God’s Holy Spirit upon us. But how do we live this knowledge and make it a reality? Ah, but even that runs the risk of interposing our will over and against God’s. As Jesus tells Nicodemus, “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.” Furthermore, “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” As crazy as it sounds, Jesus is saying to us in this text: “Stop TRYING to believe in me! Instead, surrender yourself to me. Let my Holy Spirit take hold of you, regardless of where it chooses to blow. Trust me to teach you to believe.” If there is anything for us to DO in this, it is to focus on Christ, commune with him, and hear what his Spirit tells us – to “audience” Christ, in other words to obey him.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *At Home with Christ*

If Nicodemus has stayed with us this far, the Sanhedrin is in for a big surprise when he returns to them. And what of our own congregations that we belong to? Will they be in for a big surprise too, when we stop TRYING to believe? Or will we be in for a big surprise when we find out that others in our congregation have already stopped TRYING to believe themselves? Meanwhile, out in the world, this notion of not trying to believe in anything (much less Jesus Christ) does not play well. The standard rule in our Post-Christian, Post-Enlightenment society is much closer to the example of Nicodemus than what

Christ teaches. Belief, so current opinion goes, is purely a human initiative. The idea that the object of our belief should give birth to our belief within us all by himself is scandalous. Yet we will run across some who, like Nicodemus, can sense that this rule has not served them well. Jesus Christ gives us the keys to the kingdom (John 20:23) and we are authorized to use them. As people born from above, we can be the voice of Christ to them, saying, "Let me go through the death for you and turn you into a believer."