

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

MARCH 8, 2020

Main Text: John 3: 1-17(ESV)

John 3:16. It's in our Gospel reading today and it's a verse that almost everyone can quote by heart. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

When you read the Gospel of John a pattern emerges:

First, we read what Jesus **did**

Second, what Jesus **said**, and

Third, how people **responded** to Jesus.

Try reading through the Gospel of John during Lent and see how many times you find this pattern fitting in.

In verses 1-4 of today's gospel lesson we see this pattern beginning to take shape: What Jesus **did** was to speak with Nicodemus during the night. Nicodemus called Jesus "Rabbi", which means "teacher"; he was showing great respect towards Jesus by using the word "Rabbi". Nicodemus even goes so far as saying that Jesus was a teacher "**who came from God.**"

Second. what Jesus **said** was that unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God.

And third, Nicodemus **responded** by questioning how a man can be born again when he is old.

A discussion then follows in verses 5 – 8 on the difference between being born from Adam and Eve and being born of the Spirit.

In verse 9 Nicodemus asks "How can these things be?"

Jesus responds in verse 10 by asking Nicodemus why, as a teacher of Israel, he doesn't understand or why he doesn't get it. He seems to be a little slow in understanding these two very different births, but remember, this was probably a brand new teaching to Nicodemus.

In verse 12 Jesus admonishes Nicodemus: "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

And then in verses 13-17 we once again see the three part pattern. Only this time what Jesus "**did**" was to foretell His own death for our salvation: He **said**, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." He then went on to say that verse we're all so familiar with: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

We don't know how Nicodemus **responded** to Jesus right after Jesus spoke these words,....John doesn't tell us.... but we can look at Nicodemus' interaction with Jesus the other two times he's mentioned in the Gospel of John.

The next time we see Nicodemus is in chapter 7. He's functioning in his official capacity as a member of the Sanhedrin. (vv50-51) It was the time of the Feast of the Booths in Judea. Jesus' disciples had asked Him to go to Judea but He told them to go on ahead without Him and so Jesus remained in Galilee for a while.

Later Jesus went on to the feast privately because there was controversy concerning Him. Some people thought Jesus was a good man while others thought he was a deceiver. And the Pharisees heard the people talking about this.

Towards the end of chapter 7 we find that officers were sent by the Pharisees and some priests to bring Jesus to them. But the officers returned to the chief priests and Pharisees empty handed. **Of course**, the officers were questioned as to why they hadn't brought Jesus to them and their answer in verse 46 was "No one ever spoke like this man!"

The Pharisees, as you can well imagine, were not pleased. "Have you also been deceived?" they asked. And they continued perhaps with a little smugness, "Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed."

And so it is Nicodemus who came to the defense of Jesus by asking, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" (v51) The Scripture really doesn't say anything about Nicodemus' reactions or response following his conversation that night with Jesus back in chapter 3, but I believe it must have struck a chord in his heart.

You must be born again.....For God so loved the world.....These are words very familiar to all of us here today. They are words said on our behalf at our baptism and words we affirm when we are confirmed. They are words most of us grew up with and so we are very comfortable with them.

But what about Nicodemus? He was brought up in a Jewish family. In fact, there weren't even any Christians around yet, as we know Christians today. As a Jew he was brought up under the Law. And he was so entrenched in the Law that he became a Pharisee, someone who made sure all the Laws were followed.

When Nicodemus went to talk with Jesus in John 3 he went at night. Some people say he went at night to trick Jesus or to try to "catch" Him on a technicality of the Law. But I'm not so sure about that. If Nicodemus was trying to "catch" Jesus on some technicality of the Law, wouldn't he have wanted a witness, someone who could verify what Jesus said?

No, I think Nicodemus visited Jesus at night because it was more of a personal matter to him. I believe Nicodemus saw something in Jesus far beyond his own role as a Pharisee. And I believe we see this in John 7 when Nicodemus comes to Jesus' defense. Today we might refer to this as "justice".

The word "justice" is a relational term. From a scriptural point of view it means loving our neighbor as ourselves. So even as God is "just" and loving, so we are called to do justice and live in love.

The last time we see Nicodemus in the Gospel of John is in chapter 19 right after Jesus has been crucified. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he could take Jesus' body away and Pilate gave him that permission. And it was Nicodemus who brought spices for preparing Jesus' body for burial... 75 pounds worth of myrrh and aloe. Verse 40 tells us that "they" meaning Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus bound Jesus's body in linen cloths with the spices, which was the burial custom of the Jews in those days. And it was Nicodemus who assisted Joseph of Arimathea in placing Jesus' body in the tomb.

I googled "today's value of 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe" and discovered that in today's market this would sell for \$150,000 - \$200,000. What an investment Nicodemus made.

Perhaps this last mention of Nicodemus in John 19 in purchasing such expensive spices and assisting in the burial of Jesus' body says something about his faith. It would not make sense for someone who did not love and respect Jesus to come forward with such a valuable gift for Jesus' burial, given the circumstances.

So what is our "takeaway" from these three events from Nicodemus' life?

First, we know that God doesn't love just us. John 3:16 & 17 clearly says God so loved the world and that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.....that God's Son wasn't sent to

condemn the world but to save it through Him. If we believe this we should be proactive in spreading this great gift.

Second, we need to figure out how each of us is called to spread this good news. Nicodemus did when he came to Jesus' defense before the Sanhedrin. He stood up for Jesus when it looked as though Jesus would be judged without a trial. How can we in today's society spread the good news?

In the Litany for the Candidates for baptism one of the prayers the deacon makes for the candidate is "That they may proclaim by word and deed the Good News of God in Jesus Christ to a lost and broken world."

When you think about this, there are so many ways this can be done. Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, our lay readers and LEMS, someone to visit shut-ins are all examples. So are those who offer a ride to someone who has a doctor's appointment or needs to go grocery shopping. You have to start by loving people, getting to know their stories, and caring about them.

Perhaps Nicodemus' final recorded act in John 19 was his own personal declaration of faith. And perhaps it came from that first encounter at night with Jesus in John 3.

From today's Gospel lesson, we know what Jesus **did** He spoke with Nicodemus.

And we know what Jesus **said** God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have life everlasting.

What will your **response** be this Lent to proclaim by word and deed the Good News of God in Jesus Christ?

Amen.