

Second Sunday in Lent – March 12, 2017, Year A

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 3:1-18

**“Nicodemus, A Snake, and An Invitation ”**

Three great readings today: a great reading from Genesis in which it is clear that the Holy Land was given to the descendants of Abram – who became Abraham, whose Sarai became Sarah, and they had a son together – the son of promise – the son called Isaac, which means ‘laughter.’ It is through Isaac that the ‘Land’ was given, and descendants “as numerous as the stars in the sky.” Those descendants are ‘us’ – we have been ‘grafted in’ to the family of Abraham. Paul speaks of it – and in Romans 11:17 he says that we have “*been grafted in.*” It is a beautiful thing to know that God loves us that much!

Now we fast forward a few thousand years and we have got a guy named Nicodemus, a holy man. Scripture tells us that Jesus said so; John wrote it down. All that we know of Nicodemus in the Bible comes from the Gospel of John. In John 3:1, of the Gospel today, he is described as a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a group of Jews who were very particular in keeping the law - the letter of the Law and very often opposed Jesus throughout His ministry. You will read that they were constantly trying to trip Jesus up. They were the ones who said in Matthew 15:2 ‘how come your followers do not wash their hands before eating?’ They weren’t following the ritual – that is where Jesus said in Matthew 15:18 *‘it is not what goes into a man’s mouth that makes him unclean – it is what comes out that makes him unclean!’* The Pharisees were legalists and ritualists. Jesus often strongly denounced them for their legalism (see Matthew 23). Saul of Tarsus (who later became the apostle Paul) was also a Pharisee.

In John 3:1 John describes Nicodemus as a leader of the Jews. John tells us in chapter 7 that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling body of the Jews. There wasn’t just one Sanhedrin - each city could have a Sanhedrin, which functioned as the “lower courts.” Under Roman authority in the time of Christ, the Jewish nation was allowed a measure of self-rule, and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was the final court of appeals for matters regarding Jewish law and religion. It was their supreme court. This was the group that ultimately condemned Jesus, but they had to get Pilate to approve their sentence since the death penalty was beyond the scope of their jurisdiction under Roman law. Nicodemus was part of that Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

John tells us that Nicodemus came to speak with Jesus at night. There has been speculation that Nicodemus was afraid or ashamed, or afraid of getting caught, and so he visited Jesus at night instead of in broad daylight. This may very well be the case, but the text does not give us a reason for the timing of the visit. A number of other reasons are also possible. Nicodemus questioned Jesus. As a member of the Jewish ruling council, it would have been his responsibility to find out about any teachers or other public figures who might lead the people astray.

The Judaism that Nicodemus and Jesus both knew had a good deal to do with being born into the right family. What mattered most was being a child of Abraham! Of course, there were other things that mattered too, but being from the family of Father Abraham was the basic

necessity. So I believe that Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus in private, rather than being amidst the crowd and not being able to get a word in edgewise. He wanted to interview Jesus and get his questions answered. Now, Jesus is saying, God is starting a new family in which this ordinary birth isn't enough. You need to be born all over again, '*born again.*' The new birth Jesus is talking about is the same thing that has been spoken of in John 1:33 where John the Baptist said "*I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'*" 'Water and spirit' here must mean the double baptism: baptism in water, which brings people into the kingdom-movement begun by John the Baptist and continued by Jesus' disciples, and "baptism in the spirit," the new life, bubbling up from within, that Jesus offers, which is the main thing that the New Testament is about - having a transforming relationship with Jesus.

These two baptisms are closely joined. This double-sided new birth, which brings you into the visible community of Jesus' followers – the church (water-baptism) and gives you the new life of the spirit welling up like a spring of water inside you (spirit-baptism), was now required for membership in God's kingdom. The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17 about this new birth: "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" In our Holy Baptism service – there is baptism by water and then anointing with chrism – a special holy oil only for baptism, ordination and confirmation – in the sign of the cross on the forehead - and the words "*you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.*" Brothers and sisters – we believe in the dual Baptism. We practice the dual Baptism – by water and the Spirit.

Please open your pew Bibles to page 1650 – to John Chapter 3 so that we can examine these important verses together. As Jesus says in verse 3, without it you can't even see God's kingdom; Jesus replied "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*" The Spirit of God is on the move, like a fresh spring breeze. Look at verse 8 "*the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.*" The word for 'wind', in both Hebrew and Greek, is the same word you would use for 'spirit.' When we were in Israel in 1999 – we had a wonderful guider – his name was Rami – Rami Danielle – he spoke with a little accent. He showed us something that was amazing: he took an olive branch and shook the leaves. The leaves have 2 different sides – one side is shiny and the other is dull, but when the winds blows – as Rami would say "it shimmers!" The wind, the breeze, the "*Ruach*," the Spirit – makes us shimmer as well. That stayed with me and I taught that when we went to Israel in 2014.

Jesus then puts Nicodemus on the spot – because he does not understand what Jesus is telling him by saying "*You are Israel's teacher,*" said Jesus, "*and do you not understand these things?*" (John 3:10) Jesus next tells him that if he doesn't get the earthly things – how will he understand the heavenly things that He is about to reveal to him.

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Jesus has to take the conversation up a notch and speak about an example that Nicodemus is familiar with, although in doing so He speaks about His own death. *“No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”* (John 3:13-15) Jesus is speaking of Moses having to make a bronze snake. Please turn to Numbers 21:6 on page 242. The Israelites were traveling and eating the food that God provided daily, manna in the morning and quail in the evening, and He did so for forty years – and it wasn’t good enough – and they were complaining! God sent a test – venomous snakes. *“Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, ‘We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”* (Numbers 21:6-9) Jesus used this example to this well-known teacher – which the Jewish people would know as a part of their lives – and He showed that God is providing a way for the world today – just as then – but instead of a snake on a pole –God’s Son – the Son of Man- would have to be lifted up on a cross so that believers would live.

Now comes the haymaker (if you ever watched a boxing match – it is the big punch) – Jesus tells Nicodemus the plan that God has had to provide life for those who believe in Jesus, and the result of rejecting that invitation that is given to the entire world. Choices have consequences. You know the words – turn back to page 1651 – verse 16. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* Jesus is telling him that the invitation is for everyone – He uses the word ‘world’ and in the world comes first the Jew and then the Gentile – because as John would record in John 1:11 *“He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”* Since the Jews would, for the most part, not follow Him – the Gentiles would be given the mantle of leadership, from which the Jews would continue to receive the invitation. Just in case there was any doubt – Jesus clarifies the issue about the gift of eternal life for those who gratefully accept Jesus, and for those who reject Him. These are words that many today never want to hear – they love John 3:16 because of its inclusive language – but want no part of verses 17 and 18. *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”* I strongly suggest that you continue reading right on through to verse 21 later today.

These are hard words to hear if you have turned a deaf ear to the truth – which Jesus said on the night before He died in the upper room, He is *“the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* (John 14:6) People have tried to change those words to say ‘that was for then and today is a totally different time. The fact remains that believing in **Jesus is the way to eternal life** – and that rejecting Him brings condemnation. Those are

not my words – they are God’s! I don’t know about you – but I am praying for people to wake up and receive Jesus into their hearts today – before it is too late!

One more thing about Nicodemus – he shows up after Jesus’ crucifixion. In John 19 we find Nicodemus assisting Joseph of Arimathea in Jesus’ burial. Joseph is described in the Gospel of John as a rich man and in Mark 15:43 as a member of the Council. So here we have both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus as members of the Ruling Council. He is also described in John 19:38 as a disciple of Jesus, although a secret one because he was afraid of the Jews. Joseph asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Nicodemus brought 75 pounds of spices – a mixture of aloes, and myrrh to use in preparing the body for burial and then assisted Joseph in wrapping Jesus’ body and placing it in the tomb. The sheer amount of burial spices that he brought would seem to me to indicate that Nicodemus was a rich man. I believe that we can draw the conclusion that Jesus’ words and the evidence of Nicodemus’ actions that must have changed him – for he took great care and expense to be there for Jesus that day.

If those words could have such an impact on a member of the Sanhedrin – can you imagine the impact it might have on our friends and families? We can share with them in a note, an email, on Facebook, - your choice – or even saying “I want you to read this.” Simply put – John 3:16-18 might change someone’s life – their eternal life.