

John 3.1-17

SS Trinitatis dominica

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St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Nicodemus had a problem. A huge problem. And so he came to Jesus by night.

You know this: Jesus' cousin John had been baptizing along the banks of the Jordan River. The Scriptures tell us that as he was doing that people from Jerusalem were streaming out to see him—to see him and hear his message and to be baptized. Something big was obviously up. A strange prophet in a highly symbolic location—along the banks of the Jordan—telling everyone to repent and be baptized because the kingdom of God was near.

And who doesn't want to be in kingdom? And the kingdom of *God*, at that? That's just what the Jews had been waiting and waiting and waiting for.

Baptism and God's kingdom; God's kingdom and Baptism. This is so clear to you that you don't need anyone to explain it to you.

But those two things? Baptism and God's kingdom; God's kingdom and Baptism?—That was just Nicodemus' problem. It simply didn't compute. A strange, prophet-like preacher on the banks of the Jordan. A strange message: "Repent." A strange act. How did all this hold together?

Because, as far as Nicodemus knew, and as far as Nicodemus thought, and as far as Nicodemus believed it was all different. Nicodemus already *was* in the kingdom of God. He was, after all, a Jew. If he had to he could tell you exactly who was his grandfather, who was his great-grandfather, who was his great-great-grandfather and so on —right down to patriarch of his tribe—maybe it was Levi or Judah or Benjamin. And from there it was just three easy steps backwards: Levi the son of Jacob. Jacob the son of Isaac. Isaac the son of Abraham. He was a Hebrew. A Jew. And God's promise to Abraham of a great nation belonged to Nicodemus. Nicodemus, in fact, *was* that great nation, the fulfillment of God's promise. Nicodemus *was* God's kingdom, just as you here today are "America." And what more do you need to do be "America"?

The thing with kingdoms is this: you're either in or you're out. There's no middle ground. If you want to be an American it does no good to say, "Whoa. Hold on a sec. I'm a Canadian. That's close enough, isn't it?"

So it is with the kingdom of God. You're either in or out.

And in Nicodemus' calculus, he was clearly in.

He was, according to the flesh, a son of Abraham.

He lived, according to the flesh, *in the land the Lord had given Abraham*.

He was, according to the flesh, circumcised.

He could show you that, too, if you cared to see.

And his manner of life, according to the flesh, was to the highest standards of the law the Lord had given to Moses.

He was a Pharisee. Known for his punctilious keeping of the law. So punctilious, in fact, that his own people, the kingdom of God according to the flesh, had raised him up as their leader. A member of the Sanhedrin. Just an all-around darn good Jew.

Fellow-redeemed: that Pharisee is hardly dead. And you know him well. Or at least you should.

He's the one who, like Nicodemus, looks at the respect he's held in by others and deduces from that that the Lord God holds him in the same regard.

He's the one who, like Nicodemus, knows that the respect he's held in well-deserved. He's kept his nose clean! Lives a "good life!" And deduces from that the Lord God regards his clean life and clean nose with the same approval.

He's the one who, like Nicodemus, thinks of his wonderful ancestry and their good fortune and the good fortune he enjoys because of them and deduces that God is equally pleased with it and gives such a temporal gift an eternal valence.

He's the one who, like Nicodemus could show you his circumcision, could point out his name on the rolls at a church, or the pious books on his shelf, or the pious jewelry he's wearing, and deduce God's great pleasure in him for all of it.

He's the one who, like Nicodemus, judges himself *according to the flesh*. And when that judgment fails, as it's bound to fail, he changes his fleshly rubric so that he can fit.

Now look, if you're having trouble figuring out who he is, let me give you a few hints.

He's not your holier-than-thou co-worker—or your tree-hugging neighbor.

He's not your sanctimonious wife who doesn't like it that you don't pitch in around the house—or your demanding husband up to whose high standards you can't ever seem to live.

He's not that family down the street that puts on a good appearance of having it all together—or the cool kids at your school.

If you're worrying about them, you're missing the point. They don't matter. You do.

That Pharisee—the one who's not quite yet dead? You're him; and he's you.

You're the one, after all, who triangulates between yourself, what everyone else thinks of you, and what God does.

You're the one who's made up a rubric you can follow, followed it well enough for you, and come to the conclusion that the good Lord is pleased as punch with you.

You're the one living in the flesh who's figured all this out according to the flesh. If I'm so-and-so, and my last name is thus-and-such, and I've avoided doing this-or-that, and people—some

people, at least—hold me in that kind of esteem, well, then, the Lord God Himself must be just as giddy about me as I am about myself. I jus’ wanna thank You. I jus’ wanna thank You. I jus’ wanna thank You Lord for makin’ me me!

Poor Nicodemus.

Because now this strange preacher on the Jordan has come along and told him none of that’s worth a pinch. You’re either in a kingdom or not. No two ways. And Nicodemus’ entire world was shattered. If it was repentance and Baptism and birth from above that placed you in the kingdom of God, then what of all that other stuff? Heritage and inheritance? Circumcision and ancestry? Who I am and what I do? Nicodemus could’ve had all that he had, been all that he was, and a lot more, and—so that crazy preacher and baptizer along the Jordan—he still lacked. Having everything he had nothing. For he didn’t have the kingdom of God.

And neither do you if you establish yourself before *God according to the flesh*. The successful child of church-going parents. The popular guy. The family everyone envies.

Now, I suppose the big question in your minds must be: “Why?” Why would God ever be so displeased with Nicodemus that no matter what Nicodemus was or wasn’t according to the flesh, had or hadn’t according to the flesh, it didn’t give him an entrée into the kingdom of God?

No hold onto your hats. Because the answer’s more surprising than you might think.

It’s because in measuring *himself* according to the flesh, Nicodemus had taken measure of *God* according to the flesh.

Let me say that again. Nicodemus stood on the outside of the kingdom of God looking because, in measuring *himself* according to the flesh, he had taken measure of *God* according to the flesh.

And the gracious Lord won’t be measured in that way. It’s a diminishment and annihilation of His mercy and grace in His Son Jesus Christ. A diminition and destruction of everything *He* is and everything *He* has done and everything *He* has done.

Jesus put it to Nicodemus this way: “You are a teacher of Israel. And these things—you don’t them?”

It was as if Nicodemus had read the whole Old Testament with his eyes closed.

How had the Lord “created” Israel except by drawing them through the water of the Red Sea on dry ground?

How had the Lord ensconced them in the Land of Promise except by drawing them across the Jordan with the water piling up on the upstream side?

Had Nicodemus not read the Lord’s promise in Ezekiel that He would restore Israel by cleansing them with purifying waters and restoring in them His Spirit (Ezek 36)?

You can know all those things, and yet have the entire Old Testament—the entire Bible—be a closed book. Because it makes *no sense according to the flesh*.

And yet, what did Israel do to force the Lord’s hand to lead them out of Egypt? Nothing.

What had Israel done to part the waters of the Red Sea or make the Jordan stand up on its hind legs? Nothing.

And what could wayward Israel do—willfully and from the heart set on a path of self-destruction and wanton wandering from God—what could wayward Israel do to turn themselves around? Nothing. A will wills what a will wills. And a will that's evil can will nothing but evil. A will that doesn't want God cannot by definition desire Him. A soul dead in trespasses and sins can't breathe life into itself. Who takes care of that? The will? You?

You see, that's the inexplicable thing about it all: wayward Israel. A slave nation. A dead soul. An evil will. What in the world could the good Lord want with such a thing? How does a sinful nation bring Him glory? How does a slave nation express His power and might? What business does God, who loves life, who gives life, want with the stench of spiritual death? And why would a holy, good, just God want to deal with a human will hell-bent on evil?

The answer, *according to the flesh*, is that He doesn't want anything to do with any of it. And the ethical entailment of that is a self-improvement plan. That's the plan Nicodemus had adopted.

But then you've taken the wrong measure of God and you've misread the entire Old Testament.

Because God *did* choose a slave nation—and delivered them.

God *did* take a weak nation, pooped out after 40 years of wandering around aimlessly in the desert, and ensconce them in a land flowing with milk and honey.

As little as that slave nation could part the Red Sea; as little as that weak nation could dam up the Jordan so they could walk across it—so little could they have escaped their slavery and weakness and sin and death ... unless the Lord Himself had done the most unlikely thing: love them, and have mercy on them, despite themselves.

A God according to the flesh could never bring Himself to do such a thing. A God according to the flesh rewards righteousness and strength and heredity and breeding according to the flesh.

But that is not the God of Israel. Never was. Never will be.

Instead, the God of Israel does for you what's entirely out of your control. He saves you. And that's the entire point Jesus is making to Nicodemus.

After all, Nicodemus is right: you can't crawl back into your mother's womb and get born a second time.

But the Lord can and does and wishes to *give* the birth from above—your Baptism.

When the Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes, they fell by the dozen and the score and the hundreds and the thousands. They were dead meat. They could do nothing except die. But not the Lord. He loved them. Not for anything they had done. They were thankless brutes. But, inexplicably, He loved them. And had mercy on them. And for them He did what they couldn't. No poultices. No medicine. He just had Moses put the bronzen serpent on the pole and gave them the simplest command: "Look." Which is to say, "Trust. Have faith." And they were healed.

For crying out loud: if you've been baptized into Christ—and every one of you here has—that's *exactly* how the Lord has worked in your life. He took a sin-loving, God-hating, death-dying, hell-bound you and by water and His Spirit—which is to say, by Baptism—He swapped it all. The Greater Serpent, the Only-

Begotten Son, He lifted up on Calvary's pole. The Righteous for the unrighteous. The Immortal for the mortal. The Heaven-dwelling for the hell-bound. You're a sinner. But He made His Son Jesus Christ to be Sin for you. You're dying. From the moment you were conceived that's your lot. But God made the Immortal Son to die for you to give you eternal life. And you've got one foot hell, and yet the one who descended is the one who also ascended into heaven where He has gone to prepare a place. For you.

And then you were baptized—again, entirely inexplicable. Why you? If you know the answer, good for you. Because I don't. The Spirit blows where it wills, just like the wind. Doesn't mean I don't know when the wind's blowing. I just don't know why. I know the wind's blowing because I can feel it and see the bent trees. And I know the Spirit's blowing because I can see the water taken in God's name. That matters a little bit.

But what matters even more is this: where the Spirit blows He brings life. Where water and word are connected, there also is Spirit. And the great swap that God made on the pole on Calvary is made yours. Christ's death to sin, your death to sin. It has no power over you. It is forgiven. Christ's death to death, your death to death. You will not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord! Christ's triumph over hell, your triumph over hell. You may laugh the devil to scorn. And should. And Christ's ascension to the Father, your ascension to the Father.

And guess how much you did for that?

Nothing.

Why?

Because the Son of Man was lifted up just like the serpent in the wilderness: gratuitously. Undeservedly. And that's exactly how God loved the world: He gave a gratuitous, undeserved gift—His only-begotten Son—that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Whosoever. Regardless of race or sex. Regardless of family or upbringing. Regardless of life or conduct. Which is to say, *not according to the flesh* does God give.

That's the measure of God. He does not look at you according to the flesh. So don't look at Him according to the flesh. Instead, measure Him by this: when you were still God's enemy Christ died for you. Gratuitous. The Father gave you His only-begotten Son. And His Spirit. Gratuitous. To bring life for death, heaven for hell, righteousness for sin. That you might live. Forever.

Amen.

pax dei, etc.

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