

Sunday, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

John 3:1-30  
Why Christ? Why Us?

To be born again. It is hard to imagine a scripture passage that has had a more profound impact on the church in the last hundred years. These words have set the stage to divide the Church. And these words have become a litmus test for true Christian faith – a litmus test that is supposed to define what it means to be a true Christian, and often becomes the test that shows people not to be interested in Christ or His Church. But is that what Christ means to do in this conversation?

Most of the time, we focus on the response that Jesus gives to Nicodemus. We either use this passage as proof of everything that we assume about what it means to be a Christian, or we wish to God we could ignore it. So for once, let's look at the whole passage and not just two words, shall we?

First and foremost, let's think about Nicodemus for a moment. It has been often hypothesized that Nicodemus approaches Jesus in the middle of the night because he is afraid the other Pharisees will see him with Jesus. I'm not sure that is what is really happening here. I think that Nicodemus goes to see Jesus in the middle of the night because there is something bothering him so much that he cannot sleep, he cannot rest, and he cannot wait to deal with it.

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is a Biblical scholar. He is well versed in the history of the people of Israel, from the call to Abram to the Sinai experience, from exodus to exile, from kings to a destroyed temple and Roman domination. And there is something about this man Jesus, this son of a carpenter from Bethlehem, that gets Nicodemus out of bed in the middle of the night. It is heard in the words that Nicodemus says to Jesus, "We know that no man can do what you do unless he comes from God." And Nicodemus knows that really only two kinds of men come from God – prophets and anointed ones. So his question is really, "Which one are you, Jesus?"

The answer that Jesus gives is anything but direct, and it appears to confuse Nicodemus as much as it has confused Christians since then. Born again? Born from above? What does that mean? But finally, in the 16<sup>th</sup> verse, Jesus begins to get to the answer. For God so loved the world... Jesus is the Son of God. Not just a prophet, not just a mortal anointed one, the Son of God is in front of Nicodemus. And verse 17 really shows the difference. The Son of God comes not to condemn the world but to save the world. Suddenly Nicodemus and we have a vision of what God is really doing in the world. It isn't about a congregation here and an ethnic group there, it is about the salvation of the world.

After this revelation, Nicodemus vanishes. We don't know if he goes back and is a wonderful Pharisee, if he turns his back on that to follow Jesus, or if he loses his faith altogether. Yet we see what could have happened to Nicodemus in the encounter with John the Baptist.

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Interesting isn't it? John's disciples come to him complaining that the people are following Jesus, one of the people that John baptized. Can't you hear it? "Pastor, they're all going to the new church." But John's answer isn't indignation or anger, not frustration or resignation. John simply replies that things are how they should be. He is the best man at the wedding – how can he not be happy for the groom? Jesus is the groom, and it is natural that the people are there to see him, not the best man, John the Baptist. John gets it. John understands his role in God's grand scheme- and more than that, John has the peace that comes with knowing our place in God's creation and plan. Can you imagine just for a moment how different the world would look if all of us who called ourselves Christians had this understanding?

At the root of these 30 verses in John's gospel are the sum total of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Somehow, we are attracted to what God is doing, has done, and will do in the form of Jesus the Christ. We are often so attracted that we cannot do anything but think about it until we finally get up the gumption or lose the will to resist speaking to Jesus. When we do make that midnight trip, when we can no longer ignore the presence of God in our towns and in our lives, we hear the reason for God's presence in Jesus Christ. For God so loved the world...that he sent the Son, not to condemn the world, but to save the world.... And finally, if we are truly faithful, we understand the power of John's witness, for we, like John, point to the groom. We are not what people are coming to see, we are not the ones they are looking for in the middle of the night. We, are to point them to the one we went to see in the middle of the night, and to celebrate when they hear his voice as well.