

As I said last week, all of the Gospel readings for the season of Lent this year have some kind of one-on-one interaction with Jesus. At least, that's how I see it. So last week, Jesus had his one-on-one with the devil, responding to the devil's temptations with the word of God. And this week, we have a one-on-one with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, meaning he is a religious leader well-versed in God's law, the words the prophets, and the promises God has made to the people of Israel. He has all the credentials for recognizing the Messiah in his midst—or at least it seems that way. Out of all the people who should be prepared for God's promise to come to fruition, a man like Nicodemus we'd think should be at the top of the list!

And yes, he isn't.

Oh, sure, he's not at the bottom, rejecting Jesus outright. But he's also not ready to drop everything and follow him, the way Jesus' disciples were just a chapter or two earlier in the Gospel of John.

Nicodemus is intrigued. He's curious. But he's also unwilling to risk the life he's known and his livelihood before he's one hundred percent positive. So he comes to Jesus at night, under the cover of shadows, to ask some questions and try to get it all figured out, try to wrap his head intellectually around what's happening so that he can maybe, just *maybe*, decide whether Jesus is worth it. He's not ready to fully commit.

His conversation with Jesus jumps pretty quickly into this back and forth about being born “from above.” It's also translated sometimes as being “born again,” but Jesus notes that most importantly, it means being born “of water and Spirit.” Right off the bat, Jesus is making a connection to baptism, one that Nicodemus struggles to comprehend. He is stuck on the physical realities and questions of “how,” while Jesus is quickly moving on to the ramifications of what it *means*, namely that he was not sent into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.

Nicodemus doesn't come to that place of full commitment in this conversation. In fact, it is unclear if he ever does. Nicodemus is only mentioned two other times in the Bible, and none of them are as a public and open supporter of Jesus. He comes up again in Chapter 7, in a conversation with other Pharisees about how a person—how Jesus—can not be condemned without being heard. And then he comes back for a final time in John alongside Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body and lay it in the tomb. It's unclear and unknowable where Nicodemus' faith resided by the end of his life, but it seems that, at least while Jesus was alive, he was unable to “take the plunge,” as it were.

In some ways, this is an excellent mirror to hold up when we talk about baptism. Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person must be born from above, must be born of water and Spirit to enter the reign of God and Nicodemus isn't at a place to do it yet. He can't embrace a way of faith different than that he was currently walking on. ...but that's what baptism is. Baptism *is* embracing a new way of being, a new way of living, a new identity in Christ. Baptism is a full commitment to what God is doing in the world and what God is doing in us.

That commitment is ours, in a way, in that we can *choose* whether or not we are baptized. Even in traditions like ours, when we baptize at infants, we offer the opportunity to *affirm* our baptism when we are confirmed, and at various points throughout our life. But the bigger commitment is on God's end. *God* commits to loving us, forgiving us, saving us, and grafting us into this body of God's beloved children.

Baptism, at its roots, is a dangerous thing. It's hard sometimes to remember that at this stage of Christianity, but it's true, for multiple reasons. Being baptized as a Christian in the ancient world, particularly in times when Christians were a threatened minority, put you at risk. You could be setting yourself up for ostracization, exclusion, discrimination, or even death. And even the act of baptism itself is supposed to feel a bit dangerous. When a person is lowered into the water, what happens if they don't come back up? They die. The rite, as originally imagined, mimicked literal drowning and resurrection.

Yet even today, the bigger, broader dangers and implications remain. Another pastor has put it this way:

“Of all the journeys that we will make, our baptismal voyage is the most decisive. It may be naïve to suggest that tiny babies are more alert than adults to the cataclysmic baptismal clash between God and the devil, but I think not. As pastors plunge them into fonts, pools, or rivers, the adults may blithely smile as if nothing more dramatic than a splashy church debutant ball is occurring; the little ones, however, realize they are engaged in the titanic maritime battle of their lives, the one between life and death. As they scream bloody murder and reach out to be rescued, they sense that mighty Leviathan [the ancient sea monster] prowls immediately below the surface of the raging water and they need to be saved. Only the God who calls them by name can vanquish the sea monsters and deliver them to sheltered shores.” (Wilbert Miller, *Sundays and Seasons Preaching*, 2023, pg. 99)

When Jesus says, “You must be born from above,” it's not about a pretty, sanitized ritual that checks a box. You know, “baby is born, schedule the baptism.” No, it is embarking on this new, dangerous way of life that connects each newly baptized person with the broad history of God's children and God's creation that has come before.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, makes the point that, by virtue of our baptism, by virtue of our joining into this new life, we have been made descendants of Abraham, no different than those descendants by blood or by the law. And if we look back at all the figures who

populate that broad family tree, we see our ancestors in the faith. We see the dangers and pitfalls and conflicts that our discipleship may bring us. And we also see the joy and hope and promise fulfillment that God provides.

The one-on-one that Jesus has with Nicodemus sets the stage for what we as believers and disciples of Jesus can expect. It provides hope in the kingdom God is ushering in and the salvation brought through Christ.

Amen.