

255 This Is a Sign

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "This Is a Sign", originally shared on March 1, 2023. It was the 255th video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

Suppose you heard that Jesus was hanging out at a home in your neighborhood, and you went there, and they let you in? Suppose you got to see Jesus face-to-face and ask him anything you wanted? What would you ask? Nicodemus got that chance and he found out everything. Today, we're going to find out, too.

We've been waiting for the clouds to lift a little bit today. They lifted on Sunday and we had a spectacular view of the snow up in the mountains. It was like being in Switzerland!

There are times in life, too, when the clouds lift, and we see things as they are.

Nicodemus had that experience.

The Bible reading that we're going to look at today is **John 3:1-17**. There's a verse in there that, if you know one Bible verse by heart, would probably be the one you know. But you may not know where it comes from, or why.

This reading from the Gospel according to John tells us that Nicodemus was "a Pharisee" and "a leader of the Jews." He appears two more times in this Gospel, once to appeal for due process for Jesus, and again to help prepare Jesus' body for burial.

He was a man who had earned the respect of his people. Jesus was an unknown, a poor itinerant teacher, a miracle worker who some were saying was the One, the Messiah who the Jews had been waiting for for 1,000 years.

Nicodemus was drawn to Him, but he had a reputation to protect, after all.

So, he came to talk with Jesus at night. Yes, Nic at night! 😊

The reading begins with **verses 1 and 2**,

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Have you ever seen any of the "Back to the Future" movies?

O'Reilly Auto Parts sells, well, auto parts. If you go to their website (oreillyauto.com) and search for "121g" you'll be taken to a page with a picture of a flux capacitor and this:

Detailed Description

- Time Travel at your own RISK!

- Plutonium is required to properly operate the flux capacitor
 - Plutonium is used by the onboard nuclear reactor which then powers the flux capacitor to provide the needed 1.21 gigawatts of electrical power.
 - Plutonium not available at O'Reilly Auto Parts. Please contact your local plutonium supplier.
- Flux capacitor requires the stainless steel body of a 1981-1983 DeLorean DMC-12 to properly function.
 - Once the time machine travels at 88 mph (142 km/h), light coming from the flux capacitor pulses until it becomes a steady stream of light at which point time travel begins!

Oh, the page also says, at the top, "This item is not available for purchase."

It's kind of funny because we know it's not real.

That's what Nicodemus wanted to know. Is Jesus the Messiah or some kind of joke? Is he real, is he the One?

But he's not sure, so he starts by paying Jesus a complement without going too far.

He addresses Jesus as "Rabbi", which means "teacher" and he recognizes Jesus as "a teacher who comes from God" because of the signs he has done, which require the power of God.

Jesus' miracles are often referred to as "signs". Do you know what a sign is? It's something that points to something, in this case, Nicodemus thinks, God. But Nicodemus bases his respect for Jesus on what Jesus has done, not on who He is.

But Jesus rejects that explanation and takes the conversation in a totally different direction.

He tells Nicodemus that no one can "see" the circumstances in which God reigns without being "born from above" or, in some translations, "born again," or "born anew".

The questions and replies continue in **verses 4-8**,

⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus responds with an image that I think must be a horror show to any mother ("Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?")

Jesus describes the necessity of birth, but in terms of the transformational relationship with the one true living God that comes from the gift of faith.

Being born from above, or again, or anew is being born of the Spirit. It is the new birth that comes from God.

Both the Greek language in which the New Testament was written and in the Hebrew language in which the Old Testament was written have one word with the same three meanings.

“Pneuma” in Greek (from which we get the words pneumonia and pneumatic) and “Ruach” in Hebrew can each mean “wind”, or “breath”, or “spirit”.

The Spirit is like the wind. You can't see it, but you can see its effect on things. You don't see wind, you feel it when it hits you, you see the trees move and the dust in the air. When speaking of God, it's important not to confuse one with the other, the effect with the essence.

That's what the Pharisees, like Nicodemus, had done. They had confused the letter of the religious law with the spirit of it. The Law had become an end in itself and not a means to an end. It had become something to be accomplished, not the belief, or “faith” that makes us a new creation in a new birth, born from above, and that produces what we do in life.

Anyone born of the Spirit is a new Creation. That is what produces the transformed Christian life from God. It is not achieved, it is received.

Confused? So was Nicodemus. We see Nicodemus' confusion and Jesus' response in **verses 9-15,**

⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus now gets to his main point. The people of Israel wandering in the wilderness after their liberation from Egypt had been experiencing a plague of poisonous snakes and were being bitten and many died as a consequence of their rebellion against God and then they repented. God told Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and fasten it to the top of a poll. The serpent was lifted up on the poll and everyone who looked at it was healed (**Numbers 21:4-9**).

In the same way, Jesus said, he, the Son of Man, must be lifted up. Healing hadn't come to the children of Israel because they had been good. Healing came because the people had repented and trusted and been obedient to God, and God was merciful to his rebellious people.

Jesus would be lifted up in the same way so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. A symbol of death became a symbol of healing.

Why?

Nicodemus gets his answer in **verses 16 and 17**,

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:16 is the one verse, if someone knows only one verse from the Bible by heart, that they know.

It's what the 16th century Church reformer Martin Luther called the Gospel in miniature.

But I think that the next verse, **John 3:17** is almost as illuminating.

God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn it, but so that the world might be saved through him.

God's desire is that the world might be saved.

God's sent Jesus to save the world. Why don't more people listen to him?

I'm reminded of the guy who was sitting in his home one day when a Red Cross worker pounded on his door, yelling "The dam has broken. Get out! Get out now! We'll help you."

The man replied, "Oh, thank you very much but I'm a Christian. I know that God will take care of me. I'll be fine." And the Red cross worker finally left and went on to the next house.

The waters came and flooded the first floor of his house, so that he had to move up to the second floor. A guy in a rowboat came by and said, "Hop in, buddy. I'll get you out of here."

"Oh, thank you," the man said. "But I'm a Christian. I know that God won't let anything harm me." The man in the rowboat finally went on to other houses.

The waters continued to rise, and the man had to crawl onto his roof. A helicopter flew over and the crew spotted the man . They dropped a rope ladder and shouted, "Climb up and we'll get you out of here. The waters are rising. This is your last chance!".

"Thanks for coming, but I'll be fine. My faith is strong. I know God will take care of me," the man shouted.

The waters kept rising and pretty soon they rose over the house and over the man, and he drowned.

When he arrived at the gates of heaven, dripping wet, he immediately demanded to be taken to the throne of Grace. "That's kind of an unusual request but, OK." St. Peter said.

The man stomped through the throne room into God's presence and whined, "You promised me! You said that you'd always be with me, no matter what. What happened?"

"What do you mean," God said. "I sent you a Red Cross worker, a rowboat and a helicopter."

Maybe you are struggling with belief, or you want to believe but are not sure, or you know someone who is.

Nicodemus was searching for Jesus. He came to Jesus in the darkness and the Light of the World was revealed to him.

He learned the essential meaning of the Gospel, that God comes to us. He doesn't wait for us to get our lives together. He doesn't wait for us to understand anything. He comes to save us. He comes in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ **is** the answer.

And he comes in the most unexpected way possible. He comes to save us by suffering and dying on a cross.

Do you feel that God shaped hole within you and are looking for answers? Do you know what you are going to find? That you can't find Jesus. Jesus finds you.

And when he does, trust Him. People risk a lot when they become Christians as adults, but especially so in our secular world. Especially when they want more than joining a club. I think that's what scares them. They are afraid that they're going to get weird, give up their friends, give up some behaviors. And they're right. Sometimes we have to give up things that we can't see are killing us, but we find that when we give them up, we get friends who really care about us, we get healthy in every way, and we make choices that bring us to receiving abundant life. Eternal life.

Look at the questions Nicodemus asks and the responses that come from Jesus. Open your heart to God, repent of your rebellion, and trust God to make you new.

Are you a Christian with questions? Ask them. One of the most important lessons that I learned in college was to be fearless in asking questions. God is real, and your line of questions will always return to God. Search Scriptures and encounter God. Speak with mature Christians you know (i.e. in years as practicing Christians, not in age). Search on your electronic devices; they are the greatest library in the history of the world. Focus. Pray. Go deeper in Lent; that's what Lent is for.

Lent is a season to prepare for the impact of Easter, to anticipate what is coming while walking in the wilderness, to ask, to grow and to experience the love of God made plain to us on the cross.

Have you heard about Jesus? Jesus is the sign. He points to himself. He points to the cross. He points to faith. He points to salvation and eternal life for all who believe.

Open your heart to Him, be born again, and grow.