

*There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him.”*

*<sup>3</sup>Jesus replied, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

*<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”*

*<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! <sup>6</sup>Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

*<sup>9</sup>“How can these things be?” asked Nicodemus.*

*<sup>10</sup>“You are the teacher of Israel,” Jesus answered, “and you do not know these things? <sup>11</sup>Amen, Amen, I tell you: We speak what we know, and we testify about what we have seen. But you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.*

*<sup>14</sup>“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

*<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

In the Gospel for today, we meet Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council. He was one of the top religious leaders at that time, and that meant he was very educated. I’ve heard it said that in order to get that high of position, a person needed to have the Torah, the first five books of the Bible memorized by the age of eleven. At some time, they would memorize the rest of the Old Testament. We don’t know much about Nicodemus, but we could assume that he went to the best schools and studied under the best teachers. He was the smartest of the smartest.

One night he goes to meet with Jesus. We’re never told why he waits until night, but there are two leading theories. The first one, that seems much simpler, is that he goes under the cover of darkness because he’s afraid of being associated with Jesus. The other option some have suggested, is that it was customary to seek out a new rabbi at the new moon. So, either he’s coming to Jesus to find out who Jesus is, or he’s coming to Jesus to interview him as Nicodemus’ new spiritual advisor.

As he begins talking to Jesus, we can hear his flattery: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these miraculous signs you are doing unless God is with him.” He had seen Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and healing. As a smart man, he understands that Jesus is unlike anyone he’s ever seen. And he thirsts for this knowledge. He wants to know what Jesus knows. He wants to understand in depth those things driving Jesus to do what he does and say what he does.

But Jesus’ response to Nicodemus is not flattering at all. He says, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Now, there is some debate about whether Jesus is talking about being born again or being born from above. The same word is used for both. As we’ll come to

find out though, because Jesus knows what he's saying and is choosing his words wisely, both meanings apply. But what is clear about Jesus words here is that there is only one way to the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus is confused by Jesus though. He says, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Nicodemus is trying to wrap his mind around the idea of being born again, but he can't. Maybe Nicodemus wonders if this is a test from Jesus. Maybe Jesus is trying to measure how intelligent Nicodemus really is by giving him a riddle to solve.

Jesus replies, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: Unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God! Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit." As Jesus tells us so clearly here, that one way into God's kingdom is through birth by water and the Spirit. Now compare that with what Nicodemus and the rest of the Pharisees think. If you've been coming to our midweek Bible class on the Pharisees, you know those differences. The Pharisees saw their path to God's kingdom through their works. They thought if they were faithful enough to God, they would fit into his kingdom. As one of the chief Pharisees, Nicodemus has lived his whole life thinking his salvation comes from his obedience to the law of God. But now Jesus is talking about some other way in, and in the same sentence invalidating the Pharisees' way.

But Jesus has more to say in that line of thought: "Do not be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Jesus is using the picture of being born for a specific purpose. What role does a person play in their birth? It's a passive role, right? You are not doing the birth. It is happening to you. Jesus here speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit. And just as he did before, Jesus uses a word with two different meanings. The word for "spirit" and "wind" are one in the same in Greek. Like the wind, the Holy Spirit works in ways that we cannot see, but we do at times notice.

When I was a vicar in Ohio, there was a girl in our WELS grade school who was a member of a different church body. I knew her church's teachings on baptism were different than ours, so I let her mom know ahead of time that we were going to be going through baptism on class. When I started the Catechism section on baptism, I asked the kids if they could remember the moment they came to faith. Every kid in the classroom kept their hand down except this little girl. They had been baptized as babies. They didn't remember. But this one girl did have her hand raised, and she shared with us the story of how she was at her church one Sunday and came home perplexed. She wanted to have faith. She wanted to be a believer. So, she prayed and prayed with her mom that God would give her faith. She got done telling her story, and I asked her, "but why did you want faith?" She said, "because Jesus died for my sins and I wanted to believe it." "But it sounds like you already knew what Jesus had done for you if you wanted faith. Couldn't you argue that you already had faith before that prayer?" I asked. This is what Jesus means when he says the Holy Spirit is like wind. We don't recognize it until it's right there in us.

But Nicodemus still doesn't understand. He asks, "How can these things be?" These things Jesus is saying not only sound nonsensical. Some of what he is saying is starting to make Nicodemus think that Jesus has a different idea about where peace with God is found.

Now it's time for Jesus to get to the point. No more saying it gently: "You are the teacher of Israel, and you do not know these things? Amen, Amen, I tell you: We speak what we know, and we testify about what we have seen. But you people do not accept our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Why is there disconnect between these two men? The Pharisees rejected John the Baptist's call to repentance. In a way, they had even rejected the prophets of old that

called for repentance too. Even then, as their long-awaited Messiah is preaching and performing miracles before them, they are rejecting Jesus' message of repentance. Jesus points it out. They have rejected these earthly things from Jesus, like faith, repentance, and baptism, so how would they trust him about heavenly things, like God's overarching plan of salvation?

Jesus plays the God card. He says, "No one has ascended into heaven, except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven." The Pharisees cared about authority. They cared about who had grounds to do and say what. Is Jesus not the authoritative source on heavenly things?

Then Jesus speaks of heavenly things: He draws on Nicodemus' Old Testament knowledge to show him a sample of God's great plan of salvation. Because they began to speak against God, he sent poisonous snakes to come and bite them. But he also provided healing. He instructed Moses to form a bronze snake. When the people would look at it, they would be saved. But it doesn't really make sense, does it? You look at this pole and you don't die? No pills or injections? But God uses what human logic finds foolish and flawed to show his power.

After this, Jesus drops the most recited passage of Scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." He does this because it is not Nicodemus' work that earns him salvation. It's not Nicodemus' great intellect that has to understand everything about God's plan. It does not make sense to his human mind, but it's true. This is the simplicity of the gospel.

But that's not to say this would be an easy pill for Nicodemus to swallow. He does not immediately give up his post in the Pharisees and follow Jesus. He remains in the background through much of John's Gospel. We do see him pop up twice more though. He speaks to try and protect Jesus when they unsuccessfully attempt to arrest and kill him shortly after this. He's there at the foot of the cross, as he aids another Pharisee, Joseph of Arimathea, in removing Jesus' body for burial. We do not know if he came to faith, but if he did, and it seems he did, it was a slow burn. "The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

At times don't we overcomplicate the gospel as well? Maybe you've walked out of church on a Sunday after hearing the pastor's sermon, only to say, "It's too easy. There has to be more." Like the Pharisees, we try to add ourselves to the equation. We think, "Sure, God is gracious and all that, but what do I have to do?" Be aware of all the voices out there that try to convince you that Jesus is great, but ultimately it's what you do that gives you a place in God's kingdom. What does Jesus say? "...that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Salvation is ours because we know what Jesus has done. And how does that fact meet our heart? Is it us making a choice? "The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Don't make the gospel of Jesus more complicated than it really is. It doesn't make sense that a man dying two thousand years ago could fix your relationship with God. It doesn't make sense that water poured on your head could cleanse your soul. But just as God did with the bronze snake on the pole, he works in a way that even the most intelligent cannot understand. But even if it's impossible to understand, that doesn't mean it's not truth. And what a blessing that people like you and me have been brought to faith, whether it happened in a moment or was a slow burn as the Spirit worked on us with patience! Cling to your rebirth by water and the Spirit as you look to Jesus, the Son sent to save. Amen.