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**Weekend of Sunday, March 8, 2020**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A**  
**First Reading: Genesis 12:1-4a**  
**Second Reading: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17**  
**Gospel Reading: John 3:1-17**  
**Sermon Title: “Making Room for Heavenly Things”**

## **Theme**

*A curious Pharisee visits Jesus by night to learn from the teacher his friends reject. Jesus speaks to him about life in the Spirit and the kingdom of God.*

## **Text**

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He 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.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus 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?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>The 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.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup>“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. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“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.”

## Sermon

Welcome to the sermon time for the weekends of Lent. This Lent I will be preaching and teaching on the theme of “Journey with Jesus through John” and over the course of this and the next three weeks I will be unpacking a couple of themes. One of those themes is *knowing*, or *knowledge* and some questions you can expect us to explore are:

- What do we, or can we know for sure?
- Does God revealed in Jesus Christ want to be known?
- How is it that God revealed in Jesus Christ seems to know us so well?

And then as I mentioned in the sermon last weekend, it is my opinion that Lent is supposed to be a season of *observation*. You see, it appears to me that the Gospel Readings this Lent are stories of Jesus doing something and all we can do is observe him. He cannot or does not ask us to “go and do likewise.” It would appear that what we are to do during Lent is simply observe him, although there are certainly lessons we can learn and actions we can take which I will bring out at the conclusion.

Finally, let’s get started with the Gospel Reading for today.

This story of the visit of Nicodemus by night follows last week’s Gospel Reading directly. You may recall that when we left off last week, Jesus and a few of his disciples were in Jerusalem for the Passover, and while he visited the Temple he was disgusted by all the commerce being done there and so he cleansed the Temple by running all the animal merchants and the money-changers out. Being that it was early in his public ministry and he was still relatively unknown, he got away with that disturbance, but not without eliciting questions from important powerful religious leaders. However, his answers satisfied no one.

And then at the end of last week’s Gospel Reading we had this:

**2:23** When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.

John doesn't tell us what else Jesus did while in Jerusalem, but from what John wrote we know that because of it, "many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing."

Well, the unknown upstart itinerant preacher and performer of signs was noticed by folks who became suspicious of him. You see, there had been other messianic figures in recent Jewish history and each one of them rode into Jerusalem, upset the copasetic relationship the Jews had with their overlords, at that time, the Romans, and then were defeated only to leave things a mess that would take years to get back to copasetic.

One group of folks who became suspicious of Jesus was a group of religious folks called the Pharisees and another group of powerful religious folks whom John called the "leader(s) of the Jews" but were more accurately known as the Sanhedrin.

The Pharisees were a movement or party within Judaism, similar to our Christian denominations. They were one group that took a position of opposition against Jesus along with the Sadducees, but who also didn't get along with each other. Oddly enough, these two "parties" served in the Sanhedrin, a kind of Jewish Supreme Court made up of 71 members whose responsibility it was to interpret civil and religious laws.

You need to know that because on the night that our Gospel reading took place, a man by the name of Nicodemus sought out Jesus. Nicodemus was both a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin.

Now, it is difficult to know for sure whether Nicodemus came on his own or if he was sent by the others of his organization, and I say that because John wrote that Nicodemus said,

**“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.”**

“We know.” That plural pronoun seems to indicate that Nicodemus was sent to investigate Jesus, perhaps by the larger party of the Pharisees, or by the Sanhedrin. We will never know, and I don't think it matters that much.

What I think does matter is that I see the Holy Spirit working in this scenario. I see Nicodemus as

- One who was sincerely curious about Jesus,
- and as one who sincerely looked forward to the coming of the authentic Messiah, and
- whether he, Nicodemus, was sent or came on his own, makes no difference to me.

The important thing is that Nicodemus was open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and be used by Jesus for Jesus' kingdom purposes.

Now, if you take the position that the dialogue *sounds* rather hostile, I will agree with you. But I don't really think it was hostile. Allow me to say more about that.

Remember those questions I said we would explore? Well here they begin.

- **What do we, or can we know for sure?**

What we know for sure is that at this time, before the Passion and Resurrection, without faith in Jesus as Christ - meaning anointed one, or Messiah - Nicodemus was interviewing *a man* who spoke of things beyond his comprehension.

Nicodemus was simply not able to pick up what Jesus was putting down. But I don't think that Jesus was being testy or angry or smug with Nicodemus. I simply think that Jesus was trying to prepare for Nicodemus to have his paradigm blown apart, because everything about Jesus will, in fact, do that. Jesus needed to shake Nicodemus' thinking up if he, Nicodemus, was going to be useful to Jesus' kingdom.

- **Does God revealed in Jesus Christ want to be known?**

Again, if you are of the opinion that Jesus was being rude and evasive with Nicodemus, then you might also be of the opinion that Jesus did not want to be known, at least by this Nicodemus and not as the Christ. But I see it just the opposite way. Again, if Nicodemus was going to be useful to Jesus and his kingdom he needed Nicodemus to grow in his understanding and ability to see Jesus for who he truly was.

- **How is it that God revealed in Jesus Christ seems to know us so well?**

The answer to this question is that the larger Christian church has come to understand the nature of Jesus Christ as both divine and human. Not half and half, but fully human, while fully divine. Even as I say that I realize how difficult that might be for some to understand and that helps us to relate to Nicodemus.

But the answer to the question, “How is it that God revealed in Jesus Christ seems to know us so well?” is that he is Emmanuel, God with us, and one of us. In ways that we may never fully be able to understand this side of eternity, Jesus truly is our brother and knows how it is to be human, and that is why he seems to know us so well and why is so willing to be loving, gracious, and merciful.

### **Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Throughout the 2020 Lenten series “Journey with Jesus through John” we will hear stories about Jesus in which he asks nothing of us. And in today’s Gospel Reading he didn’t teach a particular lesson. There is no “go and do likewise.” It seems like all we can do is observe it.

But that doesn’t mean there is nothing for us to do. In last week’s first installment entitled, “Cleansing our Temples” we had the Second Reading from the Apostle Paul who said that our physical beings are the temples in which the Holy Spirit dwells in us. I encouraged us last week to commit to the cleansing of our Temples. If we are honest, we all have junk in our temples, in our lives that prevent us from doing the spiritual disciplines we know God wants us to do so that we might grow in our knowledge of him. But I can tell you that the week I had made it difficult for me to do that.

My now deceased spiritual director used to tell me that the spiritual disciplines are to the Christian what insulin is to the diabetic. He would ask me, “If you knew you had to take insulin every day to live, and if you didn’t you would die, would you take it?” Well, of course I would, there is only one right answer. “Then”, he would say, “that is how you should think about your spiritual disciplines.”

So let’s say we made some effort at cleansing our temples this last week. We’ve shed some unspiritual, ungodly clutter, and now we have room for some heavenly

things. Good for us and good for God. Now when we do our spiritual disciplines (i.e., our devotions, prayers, meditations and holy reading) we are in a position to allow our minds to be opened to the things that the Holy Spirit of God wants to expose us to –

- Grow in our knowledge and appreciation of God’s love, grace, and mercy.
- Perhaps be open to a new ministry opportunity.
- Maybe be used by the Holy Spirit to minister to someone.

Like Nicodemus, God revealed in Jesus Christ has kingdom work for us to do. We need to be “Making Room for Heavenly Things.”

I am almost done but I need to take us back to the Gospel Reading and Nicodemus for just a moment. The dialogue leaves us without any conclusions about how all that business ended up. But a deeper study of Scripture will indicate that as the years went by and Jesus’ relationship with the Pharisees and Sadducees and the Sanhedrin deteriorated, Nicodemus grew in his faith in Jesus and became a believer. We don’t know how this happened, but Nicodemus appeared in Scripture on two more occasions.

In John Chapter 7, the “chief Priests and the Pharisees” began plotting to have Jesus killed and Nicodemus simply stated that their law required a trial for an accused, for which they accused him of being one of Jesus’ followers.

And the last time we hear about him is in John Chapter 19 after the crucifixion and where whatever hope he might have had in Jesus seemed like a lost cause. Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea put their own reputations on the line and asked Pilate for the body of Jesus so at least it could be given a proper burial.

What does this mean for us? I’m so glad you asked.

God revealed in Jesus Christ will return as he promised. And until he does, he has made us the stewards of his kingdom, and he told us at his Ascension that there is kingdom work left to be done. And in order to be useful to his kingdom we need to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit like Nicodemus was. And in order to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, we need to make room in our lives for heavenly things.

## **Prayer**

Holy God, through your Son you have called us to live faithfully and act courageously. Keep us steadfast in your covenant of grace, and teach us the wisdom that comes only through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen