***NICODEMUS***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

March 5, 2023

Texts: John 3:1-17 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

 Some of my favorite stories to read to my kids when they were young were Amelia Bedelia books. Amelia Bedelia works in the home of the Rogers family and gets into all kinds of trouble because she does what she is told to do - literally. “*Dust the room*,” she is told. “*Okay*,” she says, spreading powder over everything in sight, “*but it would make more sense to undust it*.” “*Draw the drapes*,” she is told, and she draws a nice picture of the drapes. “*Rather a waste of time*,” she remarks. “*Make a jellyroll*,” she is told, and as you can imagine, the jelly doesn’t roll well but makes quite a mess! So it goes. Amelia Bedelia’s saving grace is her marvelous cherry pie that seems to right every wrong that her misunderstandings create.

 Language is a funny thing. It is the means by which we communicate with one another – sharing simple directions, grand ideas, deep feelings, all kinds of things. But it is also the source of much miscommunication; we misunderstand the meaning of a word, or assume that a word means one thing when it means another, or fail to recognize a turn of phrase. If I tell you *it’s raining cats and dogs outside*, most of you won’t run outside looking for a pet. As John Gray suggests in *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, sometimes speaking the same language isn’t enough to understand one another.

 Such was the problem encountered by Nicodemus. As one of the leaders of the Jews he was accustomed to wrestling with the nuances of words, especially in the Law. As a Pharisee he was committed to dotting every *i* and crossing every *t*. Yet something about Jesus caught his eye or ear or heart, and so he came under cover of night to speak with the rebel rabbi. He came, not at the instigation of his fellow Pharisees to trap Jesus; he came out of his own search for truth. Like the cover of night under which he came, he was in the dark and hoped Jesus might shed some light about who he really was and what he was about.

 It was a bold move for Nicodemus to come. The Pharisees clearly had their suspicions about Jesus from the start, yet Nicodemus perceived something in him, something he couldn’t discuss with his fellow Pharisees. So by the dark of night, Nicodemus made his way to Jesus and offered a compliment, almost a confession:

“*Rabbi, you must be from God for no one could do what you do*

*– the signs, the wonders – unless God is with him!*”

In those signs Nicodemus recognized the hand of God at work in some form he couldn’t quite grasp. According to John, it is early in Jesus’ ministry, yet already Nicodemus has questions or suspicions or hopes about who Jesus might be – one from God – but is he ***the*** One, the Messiah?

One might think Jesus would take advantage of this opportunity to reveal to this bold Pharisee his identity as the Son of God. Nicodemus might then be an asset to convince other Pharisees to follow. But in response to Nicodemus’ complimentary statement, Jesus offered a cryptic response about the *kingdom of God* or the *reign of God* (the words are one and the same in Greek):

*No one can see the kingdom of God (or experience the reign of God)*

*without being born* ***anothen****.*

and Nicodemus could not figure out what the heck Jesus was talking about. ***Anothen***is a Greek word that has no good parallel in Hebrew or in English, which makes one wonder what it was that Jesus actually said, for surely he was speaking Hebrew with Nicodemus, not Greek. Nevertheless, John’s account of this encounter places in the mouth of Jesus this ambiguous word, ***anothen***. To be born ***anothen***is to be born *anew* or born *again* or born *from above*. ***Anothen*** can mean any of those things, so forgive Nicodemus if his first thought was the kind of flesh and blood birth by which we all enter the world.

 “*Born how? Born again? Born anew? Can someone reenter the womb and be born a second time? I don’t think so*!” Nicodemus wants to understand what Jesus means, but the visual image keeps getting in the way – how would you do that? He took literally what Jesus was telling him, and in so doing he missed completely what Jesus was saying. Jesus doesn’t help much when he adds, “*You must be born of water and spirit.*” You must be born physically and spiritually; you must be born on earth in that watery splash with which you enter the world and from above in the power of the Spirit. You must be born and then born again, born and then born anew, born and then born from above. “*How can this be?*” Nicodemus asks. “*Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?*” asks Jesus.

How harsh those words must have sounded to Nicodemus’ ears! He had come in the dark of night with a compliment and a searching heart, a leader of the Jews seeking only to understand, and now he stood rebuked for failing to grasp the meaning of Jesus’ obscure words. Born again, born anew, born from above – what did it mean? Our own translations arrive at differing conclusions. Perhaps Jesus meant all of them – if we are to see the kingdom of heaven, we cannot look just with the eyes of our birth; we must look through eyes refocused through faith. If we are to recognize who Jesus is, then we need not bother looking at his earthly credentials, we need to look at who the Spirit reveals him to be. If we are to grasp anything of the mystery of faith and recognize the Kingdom of God, then we must reach beyond literalism and be reborn into a new reality under the reign of God.

 We may think of the Kingdom of God as a place, often a heavenly place into which we will one day enter through a gate at which sits St. Peter. But Jesus is not talking about a *place* far off in the future; he is speaking of a present reality – the reign of God under which we are called to live, a way that reflects God’s will for us. The Kingdom of God embraces our here and now, not just a future then and there. Being born ***anothen*** opens us to living differently now, to live now as God calls us to live and as Jesus shows us – loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves, forgiving as we have been forgiven, serving as Christ showed us. The Kingdom of God is not a destination; it is a present reality – we live under the reign of God who is present with us, but we do so only if we are born anew, born ***anothen***.

Traditions that speak freely of being “born again” often look to some specific time of rebirth, an *aha!* moment when life was suddenly new. For some people there is such a moment – an *aha!* experience of Christ. For many others it is a gradual rebirth over time. How ever it happens, such a rebirth is the work of the Spirit. It is the Spirit in our midst that sparks faith and opens our eyes to a new world, or to an old world seen through new eyes that looks suddenly different.

It is into that world that Jesus came, in love for that world that he died. He came not to condemn us for being so dense in grasping God’s purpose for our lives, not to condemn us for the stupid sins we commit again and again, not to condemn us for falling so far short of God’s hopes and plans for us; he came to save us. He came because God so loved the world – not just some of the world, not just the Christians-to-be, not just the saints, not just the world that was good enough to be loved, but the whole world, including us, with all our shortcomings. In the great mystery of faith that we have struggled to grasp across the centuries, Jesus came to save us, living and dying and rising from the dead, so that we might believe in him and be born anew with hope of life eternal under God’s reign. We can endlessly debate the meaning of those words, or we can embrace the hope and promise Christ offers in that great mystery of faith that is the crucifixion and Resurrection and begin living under the reign of God now!

It is an invitation for you and for me to believe, a promise for you and me of eternal life, testimony to the saving grace and love of God in Christ that gives us hope each and every day. It is an invitation and encouragement to be born ***anothen*** and to live under the reign of God now – faithfully, lovingly, joyfully to embrace a new life under the reign of God now!

What then of Nicodemus? He goes back into the night without further response, but with a lot to think about and ponder in his heart. He surfaces once again among the Pharisees as they debate having Jesus arrested. He speaks briefly to suggest that Jesus should not be condemned without a hearing, is roundly chastised by his fellow Pharisees, and is heard from no more. But he does appear once more. According to John, after Jesus was crucified and his body taken down from the cross and given to Joseph of Arimathea:

*Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they – Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus - laid Jesus there.*

So, perhaps in the end, Nicodemus understood what Jesus was saying after all and was born ***anothen***, born anew. What about you? Amen