

“Nic, Mo, and Jesus”

John 3:1-17

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If I were to characterize this week with a phrase, I could use the expression “A walk in the park.” NOT in the colloquial expression relative to how ‘simple’ or ‘easy’ a situation was... there was definitely nothing ‘simple’ or ‘easy’ about my schedule the last week or so! I have however, quite *literally*, had a ‘walk in the park’ this week. Not just once, but twice. First, I had my not-so-regular ‘walk in the park’... **Prien Lake Park**, that is... on Wednesday. **[pic]** As some of you may know, there is a group of guys, several from this (LC) congregation, who meet out there most every weekday morning at 7 AM to walk. (Apparently known around town as ‘the Old Geezers’ group. And yes, I ‘resemble’ that remark... 😊).

Later that morning I took yet another ‘walk in the park.’ **Drew Park**. As many of you know, our own fellow Presbyterian Mark Judson held his official ‘engagement party’... no, not THAT kind of ‘engagement’ party... but one that announced his intention to be ‘married’ to the position of Family Court Judge.

As I said in my “Chan’s Corner” (newsletter to the LC Church), the reason Mark chose this location was, in part, because of its geographic location right in the middle of the district. A place where men, women, and children gathered to more fully experience life... where a public servant might join them to practice the Christian job description of Micah 6:8 – to ***“do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”*** There in those beautiful surroundings Mark used God’s natural creation to point His human creation to a higher purpose.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Nicodemus, a respected leader and teacher in the Jewish religious community, struggled to learn from another religious teacher. He was very confused about the whole ‘born of water and spirit’ thing, and the role they played in more fully understanding who Jesus was. In his attempts to educate the teacher-turned-student, Jesus would speak of Moses’ using a serpent-shaped earth metal to point a wayward, disgruntled people back to God’s will. And so, in some ways like our brother Mark did, our Lord used God’s natural creation to point His human creation to a higher purpose. So, let us consider what this ‘eye-opening’ story of **“Nic, Mo, and Jesus”** has to say to US about OUR ‘higher purpose...

We start with that Jewish leader, a Pharisee, named Nicodemus. Or, as his friends down at the corner pub call him, 'Nic.' Nic, despite being a pillar of the religious establishment, an 'elder statesman' in the Temple, clearly finds something **fascinating** about Jesus. He wants to know more. But Nicodemus knows that by virtue of his position in the faith community, he cannot be seen consorting with this upstart rabble rouser from Nazareth. So he goes to visit Jesus 'under the cloak of darkness.'

There the 'senior officer' admits to his 'junior' colleague his conviction that Jesus is indeed something special... not just some crazy religious zealot. ***"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."*** (Jn. 3:2) His supernatural acts... along with his challenging words about the Kingdom of God... indicate that this guy has 'cosmic connections.' But, of course, Nic stops short of just how 'close' that 'connection' is with YHWH. 'You're a strong teacher, Yeshua... but the Son of God? I'm sure y'all are close and all... You're good, but not THAT good.'

Then Jesus, at least to me, seems to come out of left field with his next statement: ***"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above [anew]."*** (Jn 3:3) And after Nic asks just how one can be born again once they are old, Jesus reiterates, and elaborates, ***"no one can enter the kingdom of God with being born of water and the spirit."***

Jesus turns Nic's inquiry about who HE is to who NICODEMUS is. Jesus is saying that 'if you really want to know more about me, and the Kingdom I represent, YOU must be changed. Your perspective must not be simply from your human observations, but your spiritual insights. Your understanding of the Divine is not just based on your wisdom passed along by flesh and blood, but by the very Spirit of God.'

Now when Nic still seems so puzzled about this need to be 'born anew' by both 'water and Spirit,' Jesus' response seems a bit harsh: ***"Are you a teacher and you don't understand these things?"*** (Jn 3:10) That comes mainly from the fact that two of the greatest prophets of the Jewish faith, Isaiah and Ezekiel... both of whom Nicodemus would have been quite familiar with... they both speak \gg of this water and spirit connection. God spoke through Isaiah, ***"I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants..."*** (Is 44:3) And by His spokesman Ezekiel God says that ***"I will sprinkle clean water***

upon you, and you shall be clean...²⁶ A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ I will put my spirit within you..." (Ezek 37:25-27)

Jesus is telling Nicodemus... and US... that if we want to see the Kingdom of God... which is not only a heavenly kingdom in the future, but one seen in Jesus, in the flesh, here on earth... it will not merely be by our human pursuits, but by God's Spirit. When Jesus says that **"You must be born from above"**, that 'you' is PLURAL. ALL who would follow Him... that body of believers known as the **CHURCH**... must not only be washed by the water, but bathed in the Spirit. We not only need physical cleaning on the outside of our bodies, but spiritual cleansing and revitalization on the *inside*. A NEW heart that God will put in us to take the place of our hearts of stone... to pour out God's spirit on our dry, thirsty souls.

It was just such a dry spirit that had inhabited the hearts and minds of the Israelites following Moses out in the wilderness. Who had rebelled against God, so filled with poisonous *spirits* that they were subjected to the wrath of poisonous snakes. God gave them a way out, however. He instructed Moses to put a bronze replica of a serpent high on a pole, and told his wayward people that **"Anyone bitten can look at (it) and live!" (Numbers 21:8)** A man-made image from nature that God could use to point the people to the only One who could save them from death. All they needed to do was to "look UP for LIFE."

We can be those same rebellious, grumbling, wayward people... who are justly deserving God's displeasure. And YET, he offers us a way out. Anyone 'bitten' by the poisonous venom of sin is also promised hope and health. We too must 'look up to live'... to, in the words of Hebrews 12:2, **"keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter (also translated 'the founder and finisher') of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."** No matter what challenges we may go through, we must never forget that the ultimate price for our lives was 'pain/paid' by Jesus. And that, in the next words of that Hebrews passage, we are to **"Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart."** When we think that WE are having a 'bad day,' we need to think 'J-E-S-U-S.'

From common elements like water and wood crosses, of birthdays and bronze serpents, our Triune God uses earthly examples of his natural creation to show us, his human creation, the truth about who His Son Jesus was, is, and is to come. Not merely a very wise and faithful teacher, but the Messiah. The Chosen One. The Savior of the World. That anyone 'bitten' by sin, loss, hatred, doubt, fear, or any of those 'venoms' of the evil one, Can and must "Look UP for LIFE!" In the words of Jesus, ***"that whoever truly believes in him will have eternal life."***

In closing, I want to lift up which is clearly the most well known verse in this passage... and arguably, in all of Scripture. Well, maybe that "Lord is my shepherd" one would take first place. I'm speaking, of course, about *John 3:16*. How many of you believe these to be the words of Jesus? Would it disturb you to know that common scholarship believes that the words of Christ end at v. 15, and that these are in truth the Gospel writer's thoughts? Does that change your perception of their importance?

For me, not at all. In fact, the idea that one of Jesus' followers was given the ability to author such a powerful 'statement of faith' speaks even more to the manner in which God can use ordinary vessels to communicate Divine truths. If God can use a simple fisherman like John to author 5 books of the Bible, including the most definitive and recognizable verse concerning God's only Son, the Savior of the world, then how much more can God use little ol' you and me? To emphasize just how valuable each and every one of you are to God, I want you to join me in reciting this foundational verse. But instead of a third-person plural, I want us to use the first person singular.

"God so loved ME that he gave his one and only Son, so that I... who believes in him... shall not perish, but have eternal life." THIS is the message of HOPE declared through the lives of Nicodemus... and Moses... and Jesus... and YOU! That we are ALL called to see God's natural creation to point His human creation to a 'higher purpose. To 'Look UP for LIFE!'

Charge: I mentioned earlier my ‘walk in the park,’ PLP-style. As I was leaving, from some reason ... perhaps a gentle wind... I looked up from the car to see a tree that was in the midst of blooming. A tree that the last time I had seen it... just a few days before... was completely barren, with no new growth at all. Clearly there was at work unseen forces bringing life out of dormancy. Beauty springing up out of what was dry and withered. And as I thought of the unseen creative powers of God, I thought about part of today’s reading from John: *“The wind blows where it chooses; we hear its sound, but don’t know how it comes or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of spirit.”* May that same unseen wind of the spirit that brings new growth out of a barren tree do the same to us; that God’s beauty may spring up out of our ‘dry and withered’ hearts. As God’s Spirit causes us to ‘look up for Life,” I leave you with this benediction...

Benediction: As you leave this place, lift up your eyes to the Lord!
The One who sent Jesus Christ, as salvation for all the world, will never desert you.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time on, and forevermore.
Go now in peace, with God’s blessing.

***“Wash me and I will be whiter than snow... Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Ps. 51:7, 10)***

Questions for Reflection: Consider a time when you felt uncertain. Can you see how God was at work in your life at that time? What from Abraham and Sarai’s story, or from Nicodemus’s story, is a help to you as you look for evidence of God’s presence in your own life?