

Introductory

We'll be leaving Matthew for a while and visiting with John the Apostle for the next several weeks. John 3: 1-15 is the appointed gospel text for Trinity Sunday in TLH. LSB adds vv. 16 and 17 and makes that the text for this Sunday. This text overlaps for a few verses with the appointed text, John 3: 14-21, from both LW and LSB for Lent 4B.

This is a text that comes up every year, and you have maybe preached on it for all – or at least for many – of those years, so you may think that you have said, and they have heard, all there is to say and hear about John 3. Maybe. That's the thing about the Bible; there is always more to learn, and always new insights that seem to come when you effort it.

On their part, they have not remembered everything that you said last year, or the year before, and not everybody comes to church every Sunday, and am I to understand that not all preachers preach on the Gospel reading every Sunday. Who are these innovators, breakers of centuries of tradition, who preach on the EP or even OT at Divine Service?

John has just told us that that after the changing of the water into wine, the first "sign," Jesus continued to do signs. He informs us of the time and place where this conversation took place; in Jerusalem at Passover. He cleansed the Temple of the money-changers, and then spoke of His resurrection when a man comes to him at night to talk theology.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The word "Pharisee" means "set apart," or "the separated ones," and that's how they viewed themselves and how others viewed them. The word has come into the vernacular with negative connotations, and the Pharisees are generally seen in a negative light by Christians, and we know why; it started with Jesus.

Jesus generally doesn't seem to like them, and they generally don't like Him. We know this because the words exchanged between them and Jesus are generally not warm and fuzzy, but often hot and cutting. When people want to think that Jesus is all warm and fuzzies all the time, they are not thinking of His interactions with the religious leaders.

They started it. As the message and mission of Jesus became clear, the opposition of the Pharisees increased. They would often ask Him questions to "test" or "tempt" (the word is the same in the Greek) Him. They call Him "Beelzebub," which means "lord of the dung hill," and proclaimed that they were not "born of fornication," implying He was.

John the Baptizer started it. When he was out in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance, the Pharisees (and Sadducees) came to him for baptism. Their coming was

an incredible occurrence, yet he greets them with a “brood of vipers” blast and said other unkind words. We assume that he didn’t baptize them, but it doesn’t really say.

Nobody started it. By their very theologically conservative nature the Pharisees were going to oppose anything new and different, in and of itself not a bad trait. They saw Jesus as both new and different, and their response to Him spanned the range from envy to hatred to anger et al. Jesus was who He is, and that was not going to change.

There are some exceptions. Some Pharisees were sympathetic to, and some embraced the Christian religion. In Acts 15:5, there are Pharisees at the Council of Jerusalem. They are the leaders of the Judaizers, to be sure, but they are confessing Christians all the same. Since we aren’t told otherwise, they must have abided by the Council’s decision.

Of course, the most notable of Pharisees who became a Christian is Paul. According to his own words (Galatians), he was “advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my own people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.” And then there was Nicodemus, who is included in the “many” who “believed” in Jesus.

John later says that “there are also many other things that Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” This conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus related to us by John times out, if you read through it, at about a minute and a half, a fairly short conversation.

I cannot imagine Nicodemus arranging for a meet with Jesus to talk theology, and then that meeting lasting for that short amount of time. is summarizing. Like us, writers of the Bible sometimes do that. John’s summarizing, under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, may also account for some of the apparent abruptness of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus.

Textual Notes

1. John has just told us that “many believed in His name when they saw the signs He did.” (2:23). He tells us that Jesus – for His part – did not trust man. He had created man, He had watched the fall of man into sin, He had witnessed their behavior over the years, and He know them. Nicodemus was apparently one of those who believed.

The word John used (23) to talk about those who believed in Jesus is the common word word commonly used for the faith of a Christian, and Nicodemus appears to be a Christian. He is described by John as “ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, Νικόδημος ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων – from the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.”

To be a Pharisee was to be a member of an exclusive club. Barclay says that there were “never more than 6,000” of them at any given time. Their root of their name is “to

separate,” and the Pharisees were theologically conservative; they took especially OT ceremonial law seriously, but Jesus seems to think they could do better at moral law.

To be called “ruler” means that he was also a member of the Sanhedrin (BCLY). Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy direct every city to have a Sanhedrin – “sitting together” – who were responsible for exercising judgment over the people. The Great Sanhedrin sat in Jerusalem, met in Temple, and it was made up of seventy men.

Nicodemus pops up two more times in the NT, both times in John’s Gospel. When some of the leaders condemn Jesus, Nicodemus makes a procedural point (7: 50 – 51); should we maybe hear what He has to say before we condemn Him? Later on, he is said (19: 39-42) to have given one hundred pounds of “myrrh and aloes” for the burial of Jesus.

That’s a pretty good load of myrrh and aloes, and it would have been very expensive to purchase and extremely hard to even put together that amount of those things. That he was able to pull it off indicates a certain degree of wealth. As in most ages, things like wealth, education, power, and status went hand in hand. Nicodemus was a made man.

2. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. It is generally thought that this was so that nobody would see him talking to Jesus. John tells us in another place that another man, Joseph of Arimathea, the one who donated the burial plot for Jesus, was a disciple “but secretly,” and the concept of being a Christian, but not openly, is an old one and still operative.

Barclay notes that there may be other possible reasons for Nicodemus coming at night; rabbis thought night was a good time to study “when a man was undisturbed,” and people get up early for that reason. Jesus was a busy guy, everybody wanted to talk to during the day, and Nicodemus wanted private undisturbed to talk theology with Jesus.

He goes on to speak of the hope of Nicodemus that “somehow in the darkness of the night he might find light,” a well-done sentence by Barclay, who knows his way around the English language. Whatever the reason, there is no more teachable moment than when a person seeks you out and asks you sincere and heart-felt questions.

Nicodemus calls Jesus “Ραββεί – respected teacher” and tells Him that he, along with unnamed others “οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀπὸ Θεοῦ ἐλήλυθας – know that you have come from God. You wonder how many more? As is the case today, there were a lot of people teaching, and lot of them were teaching theology, and a lot of them were teaching incorrect things.

Those teachers were not “from God,” but would have been seen to have been sent by somebody else. Jesus is recognized by Nicodemus and by others as being from God. It does not hurt that Jesus was connected at the hip to John the Baptist, who was also recognized to be a prophet sent from God, a case of credibility by association.

The verbs “to know” and “sent” are both in the Perfect tense, past action with enduring results. Knowing Jesus happens at a point in time in the past, and the effects of that

knowing continue into the present and future. By the same token, The Son was sent by The Father in the past, and that sending continues into that time and even into our time.

The reason given for their knowing that is that “οὐδεὶς γὰρ δύναται ταῦτα τὰ σημεῖα ποιεῖν ἢ σὺ ποιεῖς, ἐὰν μὴ ἢ ὁ Θεὸς μετ’ αὐτοῦ – no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him,” and he’s right about that. But he stops short of calling Jesus God. Yes, Nicodemus is a Christian, but a Christian with a lot to learn about his religion.

The conversation that unfolds before us is a reasoned, rational theological discussion between two educated, intelligent theologians. That doesn’t happen very often in the NT. What happens all the time is the emotional, self-centered, personal attacks by them on Him, and for reasons that are theologically not at all rational. We get that today as well.

Nicodemus recognizes that the “σημεῖα – signs, supernatural acts” that Jesus does cannot be done unless (exception clause) God is with him. Not everybody was so charitable. Those who saw Jesus with the eyes of unbelief saw the power of Satan or a magician. Seeing the same miracles as Nicodemus, they rejected Him and called Him bad names.

When presented with clear eyewitness evidence from the guards that a Resurrection has happened, they even rejected that. Nicodemus and others who saw Jesus with the eyes of belief saw the power of God in those same miracles. So far, the only specific sign recorded by John, “the first sign,” (2:11) was the changing of the water into wine at Cana.

3. These were nice things for Nicodemus to say to Jesus, and the response of Jesus seems abrupt, almost rude., but it’s not. Perhaps John edited something out. He says, “ἐὰν μὴ τις γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν, οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ - except one be born from above, he is not able to behold the Kingdom of God.” Pointed, to be sure, but not rude.

We note that throughout the coming dialogue Jesus is very pointed with Nicodemus. He isn’t like that with everybody, but He *is* like that with Nicodemus. He is, after all, talking to a very learned theologian, a leader of Judaism, not to one of the hoi polloi, to whom He is much kinder, much gentler, and when He feels “compassion,” it’s usually for them.

You don’t talk to everybody the same way either. You talk to that old friend differently from how you talk to your wife which is differently from how you talk to your co-worker which is differently from how you talk to your boss or your employee differently from how you talk to your toddler differently from how you talk to somebody else’s toddler.

Shepherds should not talk to their sheep in the same way as they talk to other Shepherds. I once lost my temper in an Elders meeting. That’s when I found out that you can’t do that. The ex-military who used a word all the time found that when he used it in a church meeting, he had to leave. You are the Shepherd, and they are the sheep. Talk like it!

Though he doesn’t seem to have a clue, I think he’s just being coy. The concept of “new birth” would have been familiar to Nicodemus and other learned Jews of his time, but just

not as it applied to him. As was the case with Baptism, so the “new birth” was for Gentiles who came over to Judaism, not for a died-in-the-wool Jew like Nicodemus.

Assuming Nicodemus knew his Talmud, it says, “the proselyte is like a newborn child” (Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 22a). When a Gentile wanted to convert to Judaism – and there are several examples of that happening in the OT – they would submit to “proselyte Baptism,” which symbolized the cleansing of the dirtiness of their Gentility.

As has become the case with Baptism, so the “new birth” terminology and imagery have become an integral part of Christian theology. We rarely give a second thought to how profoundly new and particularly offensive such things were to Jews in the time of Jesus, who did not consider themselves dirty. I suspect some of that may carry over to today.

Jesus could have chosen any of a number of metaphors, but He chose the “new birth” metaphor to speak of how one becomes a Christian. Alas, the obvious still apparently has to be noted; nobody “decides” to be born, and nobody “decides” to become a Christian. I’m speaking about and against the synergists among us, and American is full of them.

It’s one thing for a person to note that he is alive, and to say that. It’s another thing entirely for a person to say that he decided to be born. That statement is patently false and absurd, and for that reason nobody would ever say that. Yet, Americans all the time talk about how they “decided to be born again.” Blame it on Billy Graham.

The adverb is actually “from above,” and not “again.” The word occurs thirteen times in the NT, and a mere quick perusal – rather than a longer thorough study – of those occurrences is enough to determine that the word always means “from above” and never “again.” Shortly after this (3:31), the word clearly means that and cannot mean the other.

I’m not sure why KJV translates it “born again,” except for that translation emphasizes the distinction between this spiritual birth and that physical one. I’m pretty sure that most of the modern translations render it that way to sell more Bibles to Americans, who tend more than any to be Synergists, who have money, and who like to buy new Bibles.

If you ask Google how long the phrase “born again” has been around, you get a lot of hits to reformed web sites who trace it back to this verse. If you ask secular sources, who don’t have a dog in this fight, they will tell you that the phrase “born again Christian” first appears in 1928, and in the 1960s it became common, and that explains a lot.

Being born is something that happens passively to a person. The spiritual birth of which Jesus speaks is also passively received. There is no “how to.” There’s nothing we can do to make it happen, and that drives Americans crazy. Synergism may have its origin in Holland (Jacob Arminius), but America is the place where it has really taken hold.

Arminius has won the day, humanly speaking, in our country. Worldwide it is not really a very common idea, and in some place the idea that we “decide” to convert is virtually

unknown. The faithful pastor speaks out against the false teaching to which his flock is being exposed, and this is one to which they have much exposure and are influenced by.

Unless one experiences this new birth, Jesus says, one cannot “behold” the Kingdom of Heaven, a concept also very familiar to people like Nicodemus, who would have thought to get there on account of his chosen-ness, not on account of a “new birth,” which was for other people. Let’s see just how teachable this teachable moment is.

4. Nicodemus asks the obvious, “Πῶς δύναται ἄνθρωπος γεννηθῆναι γέρον ὢν – how is a man able to be born being old?” This is either a very obvious and good question, or an attempt by Nicodemus to gather his wits about him as he tries to get his head around the idea that *he* has to be born anew to get to heaven.

5. He asks how it is possible for a man to re-enter his mother’s womb, and Jesus plows on, clarifying, beginning with another exception clause; this is the only way, “ἐὰν μή τις γεννηθῇ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ Πνεύματος, οὐ δύναται εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ – except one is born of water and the Spirit, he is not able to enter the Kingdom of God.”

He means Baptism, and it is at the same time humorous and troubling to read what the Anabaptists say about the meaning of “water and the Spirit” here. I have gone from not mentioning Billy Graham by name to mentioning Billy Graham by name – when I was in Baptist country – to not mentioning him. People can connect the theological dots.

6 - 7. Jesus goes on to make it clear that He is speaking about a spiritual birth, and then He tells Nicodemus that he should not be surprised or amazed about what He is saying, but that in fact such a spiritual birth is “δεῖ – necessary,” a hard thing, often bringing sacrifice and perhaps persecution, but it’s a good thing to be a Baptized Christian.

8. It’s a good thing, and not everybody is, “τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ, καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις – the wind blows where it wants to, and you hear its sound” and there’s nothing more unpredictable than the weather, and who knows where the wind will blow. Even if you discern a general direction for wind, think of leaves being blown by the wind.

They’re all over the place. They blow over here, then they blow over there, and see that little mini-tornado swirling them around, “ἀλλ’ οὐκ οἶδας πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει – but don’t know where it comes from and to where it goes,” and that’s true, and while it is upon us, we can often hear it, and it makes different sounds under different conditions.

We speak of the wind whistling through the trees, and we can hear it bounce off of buildings and sometimes the wind even makes a sort of shrieking sound that can be heard. Sometimes we can hear the wind before it gets here, and sometimes we can hear it after it has gone past, and even the types of sounds winds will make are unpredictable.

The first word here “τό πνεῦμα the spirit” has, at least the time of the KJV been translated by English language Bibles as “wind.” My Classical Greek scholar says that the word

πνεῦμα “is very frequently used for ‘wind’ in extra-biblical literature.” But at least one person thinks that it should maybe be translated “spirit” and not “wind.”

E.W. Bullinger points out that “the word ‘πνεῦμα’, spirit, occurs 385 times in the New Testament, and is never translated “wind,” except in this one place. There is a proper word for “wind,” which is “ἀνέμος - wind.” Perusing through some of those occurrences, I concur with Bullinger, and those are pretty long odds on it being “wind” only one time.

The word “ἀνέμος,” he continues, “occurs 31 times, and it is always translated *wind*. So that it would have been much clearer for the writer to have used ἀνέμος, if “wind” had really been meant” (*Figures of Speech in the Bible*, Baker, 1968, p. 248). That’s the beginning of a good argument for translating this, “the Spirit moves where it wills.”

He says that the Spirit has a “voice” (the word there can also mean “sound”), and He points out that the Spirit actually does *will* (θέλει) things, and you can’t really say that about the wind. He points out that, contrary to what Jesus says here, we actually *do* know where the wind has been because it blows stuff around, and we do because it does.

Those comments on John 3:8 are made in the context of his chapter on *EPANADIPLOIS*; or, *ENCIRCLING*, a figure of speech in which “the same word is repeated both at the beginning and at the end of a sentence” (p. 244). Like if you begin and end a sentence with a word like πνεῦμα, for example? Like in John 3:8? Could it be both/and?

He’s going somewhere with this, and He gets now to his point of comparison; “οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ Πνεύματος – so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” It makes it sound like salvation is not something you decide to get, nor is it a matter of your ethnicity, but rather seems to be almost random – as far as we can see.

To sort of tie up that “spirit” v. “wind” discussion, I think John means this to be a double entendre; the wind and the work of the Holy Spirit both look random, but they are not. Both only look random to us because we don’t know about the specific workings of God in specific locations and especially in specific people who become Christians.

We can observe that an individual has become a Christian, and we can observe that some places seem to be producing a lot more of them than others, and we can hear those Christians talking like Christians like the wind makes sounds. All these things we can observe, but we can understand and explain them only to a certain point, then no more.

9. Nicodemus still seems to have a hard time with this thing that to us, who have had some time to get used to it, seems like a relatively simple concept. He asks, “Πῶς δύναται ταῦτα γενέσθαι – how are these things able to be?” But I’m not sure whether he doesn’t get it, or if he’s using Logic to clarify what Jesus is teaching.

Logic, the science of correct thinking, is in shorter supply than it used to be. It used to be taught, and now it is more often caught, and not everybody catches as much of it. He is

asking questions, trying to clarify, and how can salvation be so random – seemingly. So far, we have the birth metaphor, followed by the wind metaphor, and wait for it.

10. The definite article sticks out like a sore thumb “Σὺ εἶ ὁ διδάσκαλος τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ – you are the teacher of Israel,” but you can’t figure it out? Does that definite article mean Nicodemus ought to be seen to epitomize the Pharisaical lack of understanding on this matter, or does it show his pre-eminence as teacher, perhaps as sort of a master teacher?

The Internet teaches that Pharisees believed in free will, but to say that they were the Baptists of the day misses the point. When it came to conversion, in the mind of the Pharisee, as far as he was concerned, he was one of God’s Chosen People, and he could decide to be virtuous in life, or not. Apparently, a lot of them decided not.

Here, Jesus is teaching Nicodemus – and all who follow him and read this – that it’s not about who you are ethnically, but about what you believe, and more to the point; exactly where does that belief find its origins? The teaching here, for Nicodemus and the rest, is that belief comes from God, working in His Church through Holy Baptism.

The Bible is a written document, and we can’t read tone, and is Jesus here thinking that Nicodemus is a complete dunderhead, or is He just messing with him – but He’s dead serious – because Nicodemus is messing with Him? Like the Seminary Prof who asks “come on Anderson, you really don’t know that? You’re kidding me.”

11. He tells Nicodemus that “ὃ οἶδαμεν λαλοῦμεν καὶ ὃ ἐώρακάμεν μαρτυροῦμεν, καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἡμῶν οὐ λαμβάνετε – what we know we can say, and we can bear witness to what we see, but you did not receive our witness.” We can tell you what we know, and we can tell you what we see, but they can’t make him grasp it, understand or believe it.

Either Jesus is here using the “editorial we,” or the first person plural “we” who are doing the telling indicates more than one person is saying these things. We know that John the Baptizer was saying things, and he was baptizing people, but as far as the Twelve, we have no record of them preaching at this point, an argument from silence.

I just checked out *Intelligent Design* by William A. Dembski. It’s pretty thorough, the subject is important, and I’m still considering wading through it, but I did get to a great quote by William Paley before the Table of Contents; “True fortitude of understanding consists in not suffering what we know, to be disturbed by what we do not know.”

To translate into modern English; a lot of people spend a lot of time wondering about things they don’t know, and we can’t know. Lord knows there are plenty of things like that, and our religion has its share of them, including the question of Cur Alli Non Alle – why are some saved and not others? Theologians have been discussing that forever.

We know God to be a loving and merciful God, as well as a just God. We know that sin is the fault of man, via Satan, not of God who is only good. We know that if I am a

Christian, it is because I have been predestined to heaven, and we know that nobody is predestined to hell. You know what is your final destination; rejoice that you are saved!

12. If Nicodemus cannot understand “ἐπίγειος – earthly” things, then how will he be able to understand “ἐπουράνιος – heavenly” things? As this plays out, Jesus is getting increasingly annoyed at this learned theologian’s seeming inability to grasp simple truths. Is this really a teachable moment, and is he problem that he can’t or that he won’t learn.

13. Dealing with the question of authority, which increasingly looks like the real issue Nicodemus has with Jesus – if he can be said to have an issue – Jesus talks about ascending and descending, pointing out that He has descended from heaven. In John’s Gospel, Jesus often has to defend His authority as the Son sent from the Father.

14. Jesus now points Nicodemus to familiar territory, to Moses, to the wilderness, to the serpent raised up on the pole in the wilderness, “καὶ καθὼς Μωϋσῆς ὕψωσεν τὸν ὄφιν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, οὕτως ὑψωθῆναι δεῖ τὸν Υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου – and as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in that way it is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted.”

I wouldn’t spend a whole lot of time on the snake on the pole. Tell the true story, which they will know, and then maybe connect the dots for them between Moses, Jesus, and the snake. The point of comparison is being lifted up on a pole – like the cross – and if you want to be saved, you have to look at that pole and see your salvation.

He knows what is coming, and He is proclaiming Himself to be the fulfillment of that OT incident which He will in fact become. Recall the account of the events that led up to the lifting up of the serpent – symbol of evil and all things hateful – and note in how many ways the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have in common with those OT events.

15. There was a purpose for the snake on a pole and for Jesus on the cross, and that purpose is appropriately articulated with the purpose clause; “ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων ἐν αὐτῷ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον – to that everyone who believes in Him should have eternal life.” The clause is conditional; belief gets you in, and it is unbelief that keeps you out.

16. As if to eliminate any misunderstanding of those clear and simple words, He continues with the emphatic “Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν κόσμον – yes, indeed, God loved the world.” If you think about the meaning of “the World” in John, it is the very thing that did not recognize their Creator, but hated Him, and who wants Him dead.

The verb in a aorist, emphasis on the action of sending, “ὥστε τὸν Υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν – that He gave His only Son,” another aorist, emphasis on the sending, followed by another purpose clause “ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλὰ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον – so that anyone believing in Him should not be destroyed, but live eternally.”

This may be the most well-known Bible verse to Americans, and the tendency is to think everybody knows it and knows what it means, so maybe we need to get cute; how about

we say the verse and you substitute your name for “world.” But if John had wanted to say “you,” he could have. But he didn’t, he said “world,” and that’s a different thing.

Law/Gospel

No Life/Yes Life – Until our conception we did not exist. And then we were born. God the Father works in Mother church to conceive children. And then we are born anew.

Unbelief/Belief – Unbelief condemns, and belief saves. According to Ephesians 2: 8, even “faith” is a gift of God.

Condemnation/Salvation – Sin brings with it everlasting death. The work of Christ, applied to a person in Baptism, brings salvation.

Silence/Witness – Nicodemus was trying to figure it out, but there was nobody to tell him. Jesus comes to “bear witness,” somebody to tell Him how things are. Nicodemus struggles, as do we all.

Sermon Titles

Jesus and Nicodemus

About Being Born Again

Yes, I am Born Again

Conversation with a Rabbi

The Serpent and Jesus

Seeing the Kingdom of Heaven

Hymns

God Loved the World, So that He Gave – LSB 571

Jesus Loves Me – LSB 588 – Sing songs sometimes that the little ones know, and the adults will like it too. It will help the children to understand that church is for them too.

Anything from the *Baptism* section

Anything from the *Lent* section