

“So, You Think You Know Jesus?”
+ 2 Lent A +
Genesis 12:1-4; Romans 4:1-5;13-17; John 3:1-7
March 16, 2014

Fix your eyes upon Jesus, the Author and Finisher of your faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame and is seated at the right hand of the Father. The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

It is always a bit daunting to preach on one of the most well-known passages of Scripture: John 3:16. What kind of new information or 411 can I give to you today on 3:16 (March 16th)? But there is always more going on in a text than any pastor could preach in one simple sermon even when everyone has memorized the words or the story that surrounds them. Nicodemus meeting with Jesus in the dead of night and the banter back and forth starts with Nicodemus seeking some clarification on what he already knows about Jesus, ““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.”

Nicodemus knows that in Jesus, in His teaching and in the signs He’s done he has experienced the presence of God. He senses/knows there is more and Nicodemus is asking Jesus to unravel the riddle. But he gets caught just like the children did when I asked,

A red house is made of red bricks and has a red wooden door and a red roof. A yellow house is made of yellow bricks and has a yellow wooden door and a yellow roof. A brown house is made of brown bricks and has a brown wooden door and a brown roof.

And now the big question...what is a green house made of? “Green bricks!” or “Jesus” is the usual answer unless there’s a careful, cautious listener who is a problem-solver and tries to stay away from Children’s sermon answers.

This famous text set in a **midnight** meeting was most puzzling for Nicodemus, even though he was listening intently and leaves us, if we really ponder all that was discussed with deeper questions, with the challenge, “So, You Think You Know Jesus?” Oh, it’s more than just having memorized the verse John 3:16.

But, of course, you know Jesus, right? All those years in **Sunday School**, some of us with a double dose in parochial school, VBS, Bible class - all of that, who wouldn’t know Jesus? Nicodemus thought he knew Jesus – was hoping for a clear explanation of the “presence of God” in all that Jesus did, but by the time they finished talking, it is clear he hardly knew Him at all.

First a detail or two: Nicodemus only shows up in John’s Gospel, where he appears three times: the first time here, the second time in chapter seven when the Temple police fail to arrest Jesus and come back to face the wrath of the chief priests and Pharisees who had sent them, and Nicodemus points out that even their own Laws provide for a proper hearing;

the third time in chapter 19 where he, along with Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' broken and bloody body down from the cross to give it a proper burial.

Beyond that, all we know is that he was a Pharisee and he showed up that night in the Gospel for what turned out to be a rather strange conversation. A lot has been made of that; that he came by night; some have speculated that he came under cover of darkness because he was afraid of his fellow Pharisees; others suggest that John wrote it that way because in his Gospel, the people who don't know Jesus are figuratively as well as literally in the dark; or it may have been as simple as this: since the Pharisees were not priests and had day jobs, they studied the Torah at night and it could be simple a matter of old Nick getting stuck on a point of theology and deciding to go and get an opinion from the newest rabbi on the scene, this Jesus fellow from Galilee who was obviously a "teacher who has come from God."

And in that opinion, that Jesus was a great teacher sent from God, Nicodemus has a lot of company, not just then, but now as well, especially in an era when as a society we are so reluctant to consider that in matters spiritual that there is something that is absolute truth. We can and should respect other religions and those who practice them, but the Christian Church confesses Jesus as "The Way, the Truth, and the Life," that "no one comes to the Father but through Him." I cannot and will not say that about other religions. I will not force my religion on anybody, but I will not waver in my commitment to Jesus the Christ because my immortal soul is resting on Him and Him alone. And for that, it takes more than "a Teacher" sent from God. If you don't know that then you don't know Jesus – the only one through whom the whole world has salvation – salvation for those who believe in His Name – that he is Savior.

But don't take my word for it, take His. "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." The Kingdom of God is more than Heaven, though Heaven would be more than enough. The Kingdom of God is everything God has done is doing and will yet do in God's passionate pursuit of humankind, lost and alienated from God. You and I are part of that kingdom, by God's grace alone, and by that same grace, God has made us His partners in the mission of seeking the lost.

Now there is a little linguistic detail in Jesus' answer that bears looking into; a Greek word GENNETHE which, depending upon whatever translation you look at says one must be "born from above," (as your inserts have it) or "born again," from which the whole "born again" Christian movement has derived its belief that one cannot be sure of his salvation unless he has had a conversion event. I didn't have one; maybe you did. I do know that at the moment of my baptism God claimed me as a child and heir of heaven and gave me Jesus as my brother. I rest in that grace, even when I feel worthless or useless. I rest in that because faith is a gift from God however it first comes to you and because my baptism was all God's doing. Water and His promise: just that simple, just as Jesus said to go and make disciples by baptizing them.

You and I depend on our baptism and the faith that was born within it because faith is not a thing; it is not an event; it is not a symbol or a ceremony. Faith is a relationship and

like any relationship it is more than knowing about someone, it is knowing them, relating to them, being connected to them.

Nicodemus didn't quite understand the "being born from above" – coming into a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ, not that I would blame him; Nicodemus was on the path to faith and that path, as you know, is sometimes rather puzzling; so puzzling to him as he tried to puzzle things out that that as ridiculous as it sounds, climbing back into mom's womb was the best Nicodemus could reason out from what Jesus was saying, though, I am certain he knew right away he had somehow missed the point. If you were to challenge him at that point, "So You Think You Know Jesus," I am certain he would have shaken his head and admitted that he was still in the dark, literally and figuratively. Just at that point it seems like Nicodemus left the scene and it is as though Jesus was speaking to all of us "in the dark" to show us what it means to really know Jesus.

Being humble in the sight of the Lord, being humble in the presence of our God and Savior Jesus Christ starts with an admission on our part, that there are some things we don't know and won't know on this side of heaven. We'd like to think that if Jesus was right there in front of us we'd have caught on right away but I'm thinking Nicodemus was one bright man who had studied the Torah and the Prophets, heard the teaching and seen the signs and still was puzzled. Would I be any less "in the dark?" St. Paul wrote that we see things as though looking in a dirty mirror or through a window that's clouded over, but that God sees us fully and knows us fully.

Knowing us fully, "while we were yet sinners, God sent His Son to die for us." It begins in that admission and in that trust. Trust is a relationship word, a word so much easier to say than to do. In fact, it's often a struggle to trust; a struggle every disciple has wrestled with. The thing is, trust only grows as you exercise it.

And the biggest thing of all: you don't know Jesus if you don't know the cross; without it Christianity is worthless; without the cross, St. Paul said, Christians are the most pitiful of all mankind for having believed a lie. With it, "whoever believes in (Jesus) has eternal life."

I don't know if I think about that every day—maybe you don't either, but when death has come close, or when something reminds us of our own mortality, those who know Jesus, who trust Jesus, who belong to Jesus, begin to understand that just beyond the grave and gate of death, is Jesus and when it comes our time to pass through that gate, we will see at last the One who has been with us every step of the way, until our final step takes us home to Him. Amen.

Now may God, our leader and guide, who brought us to new birth through the waters of our baptism, strengthen our faith in His promises that we may cling to the cross that brings us life.