

SERMON— John 3: 1-17--2nd Sunday in Lent 3/5/23 - Emmanuel Lutheran Church - Rev. Timothy W. Sadler.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I would like you all to use your imagination for a few minutes. I want you to imagine you're in a theatre and the stage is brightly lit. One lonely person stands on the stage and his name is Jesus.

The lights on the stage are so bright you can see the people in the first row. Look, there's John, the beloved disciple. And there's Fred who runs the local grocery store and builds homes for Habitat for Humanity. There's Peter, the fisher, the rock of a disciple.

There's Judy, who tutors local children to help them stay in school. There's Mary Magdalene, the one who has been so devoted to Jesus. And right next to her there's Bert, the man who works in the Bookmobile and sings in the church choir.

Gathered in the light around the stage are the followers of Jesus, ordinary people who are a little anxious because they don't know what the future holds. They are like every one of us...who sometimes struggle to believe, people who know they need mercy, and are trying hard to live life doing what they can—taking it one small step at a time.

Suddenly, a man emerges from the darkness of the auditorium and walks onto the stage. His name is Nicodemus, and he has come to see Jesus. He stands there, blinking in the light; someone who, we're told, is a leader of the Jews. We know he's part of the group trying to prove Jesus wrong, so why is he here? Maybe he doesn't even know himself.

Nicodemus represents a lot of people in this world. He's the person from our past who, when we spoke about our faith, wondered if we were getting a little carried away by this... "religious thing." He's the skeptical neighbor who has no use for "organized religion." And he's the guy at work who mocks the weakness of people who pray in times of trouble. He's the voice inside all of us that sometimes wonders if faith is an illusion.

Nicodemus is smart enough to recognize that Jesus is up to something extraordinary. He knows that faith has a mysterious power. But he comes with questions that seem to want to put...Jesus to the test.

Nicodemus is a symbol of every person who stands in the shadows, who is attracted to Jesus but also afraid of Jesus at the same time. After all, Jesus is somewhat unpredictable. You never know what he might ask of you.

Nicodemus admits that Jesus must be a teacher come from God, but he seems to find that rather amazing. It's almost as if he's saying, "how can this be?" How could a teacher like you...lacking the usual credentials, get to such a place of divine privilege? Where do you get all that authority really?

All of us sitting around the stage have heard those kinds of questions too. This world is always trying to take religious experience and make it into something less than what it really is; something the world can understand, manage and control. Something the world can be comfortable with.

The world can only understand something if we talk about it in terms of wealth, or status or need for power.

Jesus says “uh, uh, It’s not a matter of any of those things. You can’t put it under a microscope or analyze it in earthly terms. It comes from above.” Basically, Jesus tells Nicodemus that... in order for him to understand the life of the Spirit, he’s got to experience that life. He must be “born from above.”

As long as Nicodemus just talks about it, he’ll have no clue who Jesus is and what Jesus is all about in this world. As long as he just talks about it, it can’t make a difference in his life. He’s got to be born from above, to be changed inside out. Like the wind blowing where it will, it takes the life-changing experience of the Holy Spirit to make that happen.

I read a story once about a radical Baptist preacher named Will Campbell who attended the trial of a Klansman accused of murdering a black man. A reporter covering the trial noticed...that during a recess, Campbell seemed to be on close personal terms with both the accused Klansman and the family of the murdered man. He spent a lot of time talking to both. “How can this be?” the reporter asked Campbell—and doesn’t he sound a little like Nicodemus? “How is this possible for you to be on positive terms with both the man accused of a hateful, racist murder, and the victim’s family”? It doesn’t make sense.”

Campbell muttered something about every person being a human being, but the reporter wasn’t satisfied. “This isn’t logical” he insisted. “You can’t care for both the Klansman and the victim. Why do you think you can?” Campbell finally lost his patience and blew up. “Because I’m a Christian!”

The reporter was thinking like the world does, and to him what Campbell was doing was impossible. The reporter really didn’t understand what it means to be born from above.

So—why does Fred who runs the local grocery store, build homes for Habitat for Humanity? Why does Judy care so much about the kids she tutors? Why does the beloved disciple John ...fall on his knees at the sight of any empty tomb? And why does Bert who runs the Bookmobile take the time and dedication to sing on the church choir?

It’s not because they’re seeking status, approval, wealth, or power. NO... it’s rather because the Spirit has spoken to them from above and their lives are not a witness to what they’ve actually experienced.

Does the world understand this? Probably not. And there’s no way to really prove it with physical evidence. But you could ask Nicodemus, who was one of the group who challenged Jesus... but who shows up later as a follower of Jesus Christ. “How can this be?”

I'm sure Nicodemus must've been asked this question at least once in his life, and I imagine him shrugging his shoulders and replying, "I can only speak of what I know. The wind blows where it will, and so it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

AMEN.