3-8-20, THW Tucson

Sermon on John 3:1—17

1. Introduction
2. In last week’s sermon, the wilderness was physical. Today, the wilderness is a metaphorical one.
3. Nicodemus is an important teacher among the Jewish religious leadership.
4. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, one of the members of a religious group who emphasized strict obedience to the Torah, the instruction of God.
5. Prayer
6. The text
7. (v. 1—10) **The conversation** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews [When John uses the expression “the Jews” he’s referring to the leadership; he and the other followers of Jesus are all Jewish.]
8. (v. 2) He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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 and those he represents are impressed by the outward signs Jesus has accomplished. But Nicodemus himself is in a kind of cognitive and spiritual wilderness. He wants to understand Jesus better. But he’s reluctant to be seen doing talking to Jesus so he comes skulking around at night. He’s caught in a kind of tension.]
9. (v. 3) Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” [This Greek word can also be translated as “again.” The majority of the commentators opt for “from above” and take “again” as a given. This is the first part of the teaching which Nicodemus encounters in his particular wilderness.]
10. (v. 4) Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone ne born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into a mother’s womb and be born?” [Here Nicodemus is being highly literal, and also slightly crude]
11. (v. 5—8) Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.
12. (v. 6) What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
13. (v. 7) Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’
14. (v. 8a) The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes form or where it goes.
15. (v. 8b) So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
16. (v. 9) Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”
17. (v. 10) Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”
18. (v. 11—17) **The teaching** Very truly , I tell you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.
19. (v. 12) If I have told you about earthly things [God’s impact on the things of the earth] and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?
20. (v. 13) No one has ascended into heaven [This is probably in response to some mystics of the time who were contending that Moses had ascended into heaven.] except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. [The Son of Man, in this context, refers to the fact that Jesus is divine but has been born into human flesh.]
21. (v. 14 & 15) And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness [This is a reference to Numbers 21, where the people complain to Moses about their situation and God sends serpents among the people. When the people repent of their complaining, Moses instructs them to make a serpent out of bronze and lift it up o a pole. Those who are bitten by serpents may look at the bronze replica of the serpent and their lives are spared.], so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
22. (v. 15 & 16) For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. [This is the second part of the teaching in Nicodemus’ wilderness, and this is also our clear teaching of where God is in the wilderness.] Indeed, God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him.
23. So, what?

Well, we need to think some about Nicodemus, don’t we? He comes to Jesus under the cover of night. And he doesn’t seem to get anything Jesus is talking about. But would we have been able to get it any better than Nicodemus did? I doubt it.

We only read of Nicodemus in John’s Gospel. But what we do read, beyond this encounter that we are looking at this morning, is interesting. In John 7 we read of how members of the Sanhedrin were prepared to condemn Jesus, but Nicodemus reminds them that Jesus is entitled to a hearing. And in John 19 we read that Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea with the preparation of Jesus’ body for burial. Clearly this brief encounter with Jesus impacted Nicodemus. We have to accept, I think, that Nicodemus has been changed by his experience in his cognitive, spiritual wilderness, and he is pulled closer and closer toward Jesus.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of water and the Spirit to see the kingdom of God. I believe that some of our Christian sisters and brothers have hijacked the term “born again” and made it an expression of exclusion. And I believe this is a mistake.

Every one of us who follow Jesus as Savior have experienced new life. And that new life continues and grows and changes as we are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. And isn’t this new life a matter of being born anew spiritually? I would argue that every follower of Jesus is born again.

And what is that new birth for? Is it just for us to feel good and peaceful? Of course not! Our new birth sets us free and gets us out of our own way. Because we’re born again, we can love others, regardless of how they treat us. Because we’re born again, the plight of the homeless and the hungry and the hopeless is our problem. Because we are born again, we can see that our brothers and sisters on the Tohono O’Odham Nation are our family, worthy of respect and honor and love, so our gifts of warm clothing are expressions of family, not a transaction between wealthy strangers and needy strangers. Because we are born again, we can share with others what Jesus has done in and for us. We can share the Gospel not from a place of arrogance but from a place of true humility.

God so loved the world. God so loves the world, that through Jesus we are transformed. And through all of us who follow Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the world is changed for the better.

Do you know that you have new life? Do you know that you are being continually transformed? Do you know that you are God’s beloved? May it be so. Amen