

# *Feasting on the Word*

Preaching the  
Revised Common Lectionary

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# John 3:1-17

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>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." <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

## Theological Perspective

Nicodemus continues to be a controversial figure in the Christian theological tradition. We cannot come to the story of his discussion with Jesus one night in Jerusalem without his having been shaped already in our imaginations in some way. For John Calvin, Nicodemus was judged by the company he kept, namely, Joseph of Arimathea, whom John describes as "a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews" (19:38). Calvin took this to mean that Nicodemus was also a secret disciple who visited Jesus at night out of fear of the Jews. Calvin therefore labeled all those in France who were evangelicals at heart but Roman Catholics in practice "Nicodemites," for they were secretly disciples who acted out of fear of the Roman Catholic authorities. Søren Kierkegaard described Nicodemus as an admirer of Jesus, as opposed to a follower. Like Calvin, Kierkegaard saw Nicodemus as someone who only partially associated himself with Jesus, but who held back from a full and public commitment to him because of his fear of persecution from his own people. Both of these pictures of Nicodemus may be supported from the text, but they lose sight of the fact that John also tells us that Nicodemus argued with the Sanhedrin against arresting Jesus on the grounds that he had not been given a fair hearing (7:50–51), which sets him publicly at odds with the

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Nicodemus, religious leader and teacher of the law, was most likely a public figure of no mean standing in his Jewish community. He had recognized something significant and noteworthy about the charismatic young new teacher to whom the crowds were flocking. Nicodemus had come to realize that the presence of God was very clearly with Jesus: "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God" (v. 2). Yet Nicodemus's social and religious standing did not allow him to be seen openly consulting the untutored Jesus. Like Nicodemus, we discover that some of our most profound understandings about life come from conversations and consultations with people we talk to "at night," people we are often afraid to be seen associating with.

Our familiarity with this text and our associations with the language of rebirth can stand in the way of an appreciation of the conversation between these two religious teachers. Wordplay, symbolic language, misunderstanding, and confusion, common in John's writing, are very much in evidence.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus because of "the signs" (v. 2)—those acts and words of Jesus that are pointers to the inbreaking of God's reign in the world. Jesus immediately confronts Nicodemus with a riddle. The only way you can see or understand God's realm is for you to be born *again*. Nicodemus,

<sup>11</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

## Exegetical Perspective

*The Trinity and the Bible.* Trinity Sunday celebrates the tri-unity of God. Although there is no *doctrine* of the Trinity in the Bible (that is a later development), the reality of God, Christ, and the Spirit permeates the NT. Two NT texts do join them in a threefold formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in baptism and benediction (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13). Further, the NT readings for this Trinity Sunday (Rom. 8:12–17 and our text from John 3:1–17) also refer to Father, Son or Christ, and Spirit. The same God is at work in today’s reading from Isaiah 6:1–8, part of sacred Scripture for Paul and John, as well as for Jesus and Nicodemus.

*The Historical Context for the Nicodemus Story.* As a Pharisee, Jewish leader, and teacher, Nicodemus becomes a distinctive link to Jesus’ own Hebrew heritage. However, given the highly symbolic character of the Gospel of John, he reflects more the period when this text was written toward the end of the first century than the earlier time of Jesus himself.

After the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in the year 70 CE, rabbinic Judaism emerged, with its emphasis no longer on temple sacrifice but on synagogue teaching (“rabbi” means “teacher”). It was a time of conflict between those Jews who believed in Jesus as God’s Messiah and

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The Gospel according to John presents special challenges to the preacher, for here is a work of unique theological reflection upon the good news the author has received. Put another way, this Gospel is second-order contemplation, a step removed from burgeoning announcement. The author has already taken delivery of information, meditated upon that information, and distilled it. What we have received as a result of that distillation process is a work of concentrated theology.

Because of this theological concentration, it is far easier to follow the task of exegesis with the delivery of an analysis or lecture, rather than a sermon. Certainly, teaching is a function of the sermon, but instruction on what the author of this Gospel intends by the use of various devices can easily overwhelm the homiletical perspective. So the question of how we teach this text, share the results of this author’s reflections, but bring its truths to bear on the realities of our world is especially acute. Fortuitously, that is precisely the message of this passage. Out of the darkness of night, the domain of ignorance and misunderstanding, we bring our questions, and those questions are addressed by the Word made flesh, bringing words of new life and fresh perspective. “You must be born from above,” he says, and the Spirit will make this new life possible.

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rest of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus also brought the spices to prepare the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:39). Hence Nicodemus is a complex figure who may not be reduced to a hypocritical believer or an admirer, but may rather be seen as a work in progress, on his way from being intrigued by Jesus to believing in Jesus.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin. He comes to Jesus at night to let him know that, in his judgment, the Sanhedrin has reason to acknowledge him as a teacher who has come from God. This acknowledgment of Jesus will become the point of contention, as Jesus challenges Nicodemus to reconsider what it means to be “a teacher who has come from God” (3:2). Nicodemus takes this to mean that the signs that Jesus does reveal the presence of God in Jesus. We have already been told that Jesus “would not entrust himself” to people who believe because of his signs (2:23–24), so this already casts a cloud over Nicodemus’s validation of Jesus as a divinely sanctioned rabbi. However, the point at issue in this passage has to do with the way Nicodemus and the Sanhedrin know that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God, namely, by fitting Jesus into what they already know from their interpretation of the Law of Moses. Jesus does not have his origin as teacher from Moses, but from God, for he has descended from God in order to declare what he knows of God, before he returns to God (3:11–13). Jesus therefore responds to Nicodemus by telling him that he cannot see the kingdom of God without being born again, without being born from on high. Nicodemus shows his attempt to understand Jesus based on what he already knows to be true, by ignoring the possibility of being born from on high, and showing the impossibility of being born again (3:4). Jesus responds to this misunderstanding by highlighting the source of the birth from on high, which is the Spirit.

Contrary to Nicodemus’s attempt to fit Jesus into his previous understanding of the world, the birth from above is beyond anyone’s control and is subject to the mysterious freedom of the Spirit. Those who think in earthly categories do not know where the lives of those born from above come from or where they go, even as Nicodemus does not see Jesus as the teacher who has come from God in order to return to God. The description of the new birth as “of water and Spirit” has been interpreted by the church to mean baptism. However, as Zwingli rightly pointed out, this would actually frustrate the whole point that Jesus is making, namely, that the new birth of the

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familiar with disputation about words and texts, goes first for the plain, literal meaning of what he has just heard. Jesus continues on the symbolic, nonliteral plane. To enter God’s realm one has to be born “*from God’s realm*.” So often our misunderstandings and disputes arise because the interlocutors are not speaking the same language. Jesus is using symbolic, spiritual, analogical language; Nicodemus is looking at the plain, literal meanings. Nicodemus sees birth as “of the flesh”; Jesus speaks of spiritual realities: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v. 6). Rebirth is a spiritual experience available to all, but perhaps most needed by religious people who might think they do not need it. Religion often becomes a matter of the correct observance of particular practices. When these practices become routine, they may actually serve to hinder spiritual sensitivity. A spiritual transformation in such situations is very much needed.

In fact, to be in tune with God’s reign and presence we all need a transformative overhaul of our traditional ways of seeing and being. We need a transformation of our whole way of knowing and experiencing the world. When this happens, it is as if we have begun life all over again. Nicodemus’s confusion deepens because he is unable to leave the realm of literal thinking to join Jesus on an imaginative, spiritual level. It is not possible to use literal, physical interpretations to encompass the spiritual truths Jesus is alluding to. “The wind (spirit) blows where it chooses and although you may hear the sound of it, you have no idea where it originates and where it is going.” The spiritual is often in contrast with the flesh. In Romans 8:5–8, Paul argues that conflict between the flesh and the Spirit characterizes the Christian life. The Spirit is active in Christ Jesus. In Romans 8:9 the Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ. Jesus speaks about the spiritual truths he knows and can bear testimony to. Nicodemus at this stage is not yet able to grasp these truths. For Nicodemus, there is confusion, not enlightenment.

In the context of this conversation, Christ’s divine origins (v. 13, “from heaven”) are revealed. His manner of suffering and death (v. 14: “lifted up” on the cross) are also alluded to. All this is for a purpose. Christ descends from above to bring the truth from heaven to humankind. He is indeed truth incarnate. He comes to be a source of healing and salvation, much as Moses’s bronze serpent, lifted up on a pole in the wilderness (Num. 21:8–9), brings healing to anyone who looks up at it in faith. Jesus

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those who did not. The texts in John that precede today's show a Passover context, Jesus' cleansing of the temple, and the assertion that among Jews "many believed in his name" (John 2:23; note also 8:30). At the Council of Jamnia in the 80s, an official announcement declared that anyone who believed in Jesus as the Messiah would be excluded from the synagogue. The Gospel of John reflects this separation three times (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). When this Gospel speaks of "the Jews," it is Jewish Christians referring to those Jews who did not believe in Jesus and who remained in the synagogue. John's Gospel is a massive attempt to encourage belief in Jesus as God's Messiah (note its stated purpose in 20:30–31).

Today's Gospel story presents Nicodemus as one who is trying to make up his mind about Jesus. The great Roman Catholic NT scholar of blessed memory, Raymond Brown, suggests that Nicodemus represents secret disciples of Jesus (he does come "by night"). We do know that he appears twice more in this Gospel. He defends Jesus, asking that he be given a hearing (7:50–51), and he joins with Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, to bury Jesus (19:38–40). In John, Nicodemus comes to Jesus near the beginning of his ministry, defends him in the middle, and is with him at the end. Is this not what a disciple would do?

*The Kingdom and Being Born from Above.* Our text often is used by those who speak about being "born again." This hinges on the translation of an ambiguous Greek word (*anōthen*), which can be translated "again" or "from above." It is Nicodemus who misunderstands and speaks of being "born again." It is Jesus who says one must be "born from above." For John, Jesus affirms that entering into God's reign is not a manipulation of the flesh (i.e., of humans shaping forms of religious experience). It is a gift of God's Spirit, unshaped by human hands but "blowing" where it will "from above." The story connects Spirit with water because, in the symbolism of John, Jesus brings God's gift of "living water" (4:10). Further, "'out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now [Jesus] said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive" (7:38–39).

*The Inclusion of "We" Testimony.* Though Jesus continues to speak in verses 11 and 12, the conversation with the seeking-to-understand Nicodemus is over, and the "we" of John's community joins in: "[W]e speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not

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This first discourse in John's Gospel is a dialogue on two levels at once, a conversation from two different perspectives, an exchange whose result is misunderstanding. But the misunderstanding is purposive: The function of misunderstanding is to catch us, the readers, at work in our accustomed rut. Like Nicodemus, we collect pennies from heaven when what is being offered is unimagined wealth. That wealth is the very kingdom of God. In this passage, the only time the word "kingdom" is used in the Gospel according to John, Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and us, that God's kingdom is here. The kingdom of God is not some far-off goal to be attained, for there is nothing we can do to attain it. The kingdom is present now, as a gift from God. Only God can gift us, can beget us as a totally new being in a new world.

Why should we be so significant? Why should God even care? "The wind blows where it chooses" (v. 8) is an image of God in search of humanity, a vision of God's decision to turn toward humankind, to search for us, and to reveal God's self to us in that activity. Why? Because it is the nature of God to be in relationship. On Trinity Sunday we celebrate that most fundamental element of faith and practice: Christian relationship. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us of the communal inner life of God: God the Father is with the Son who is with the Spirit who is with the Father, self-communicating, self-giving, self-receiving. When we profess the Trinity, we affirm that it is of the essence of God to be in relationship. But we also acknowledge that it is the nature of God to take the initiative in search of communion, to reveal God's self as the source of life itself, to pursue us, to come to us to reveal God's self as the source of all creation, the salvation of all God has created, the sustainer of all life. Here is One who is vulnerable to us in every way, yet cannot be possessed, utterly basic to our existence, yet beyond our reach.

"How, then, is God's relationship with the world possible?" we ask. We turn again to Scripture: "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." The unknowable One has made himself known. The incomprehensible One has made himself heard. God is speaking; and the more nearly the divine approaches, the more we acknowledge we cannot know and cannot comprehend where the Holy comes from or where it goes. Yet something of that mystery is turning to us.

God searches for us to complete the revelation of God's being. God searches for us to participate in

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Spirit is not subject to human control and cannot be coordinated with the rest of what we know of this world. Nicodemus does not understand how these things can be, which leads Jesus to question how he can view himself as a teacher of Israel.

Jesus goes on to teach Nicodemus more fully about the birth from above, which is based entirely on what God is doing in him. Even as Jesus comes from God and speaks what he knows of God, so Jesus is returning to God, but only by being lifted up on the cross. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent so that all who suffered from the venomous bites of the serpents would be spared (Num. 21:4–9), so all who turn in faith to the lifting up of the Son of Man on the cross may have eternal life, which is a synonym for the birth from above. Thus the birth from above will take place by faith in the death of the Son of Man, which is even more paradoxical than birth by the freely given wind of the Spirit. Faith receives eternal life from the death of the Son of Man, because in it is found the self-giving love of God for the world. However, the Father's gift of the Son for the eternal life and salvation of the world also plunges the world into the strife of decision and judgment, for the alternative to faith in the Son is to perish and to be condemned. The self-giving love of God in Christ cannot be accepted without illuminating our lives from the inside out, revealing to us that our old life not only is from below but also is filled with deep darkness that opposes the light of the love of God. Those who cannot bear to have themselves revealed before God in this way refuse to come to the Son, and therefore perish.

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too is to be lifted up on the cross, so that whoever looks up at him in believing faith will be saved. This is no coincidence. It is in the will and purpose of the loving God who wishes all to have eternal life. God has a salvific purpose in mind through all of Christ's life and death. God gives God's only Son to save the world. Believing in him becomes the means for obtaining eternal life. "Eternal life" is more a different quality of life than merely an elongation of life. It is a spiritual, transformative quality of life that transcends the vicissitudes of this physical life.

God's desire in sending God's Son is not condemnatory. Rather, it is redemptive. The whole mission and purpose of God in Christ is to rescue and recover humanity, from being deeply embedded in self-defeating pursuits in a physically absorbed life. God in Christ wishes to reclaim, rename, and reauthor the stories of our lives with a new life empowered by the grace of God and made manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

We are glad to note that by the time we encounter Nicodemus again in John's Gospel (7:45–52), he is more convinced about the mission of God in Christ and is arguing for Jesus in public. He is no longer afraid to be identified as a follower of Jesus. Such is his "coming out" that by 19:38–42 he is identifying himself with Christ in his death by providing spices to embalm his dead body.

God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation (born from above); everything old has passed away, everything has become new (2 Cor. 5:17–19). All of this is accomplished by the creative love of God, the redemptive offering of Christ, and the empowering presence of the life-giving Spirit. And these Three are One.

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receive our testimony.” This is their witness to their brothers and sisters in the synagogue at the end of the first century. It proclaims that those who do not believe in the earthly and tangible “word made flesh” in Jesus cannot understand the heavenly and intangible glory that is in him. Here the argument draws on two figures in the Hebrew heritage of the hearers: God’s new-world-bringing Son of Man (see Dan. 7:13–14) and the Moses-lifted-up healing serpent (Num. 21:9). The testimony is that now Jesus is that descending-ascending Son of Man, and his lifting up on the cross brings God’s healing and new life. In John, “eternal life” is not only a quantity of life beyond death, but a quality of life already lived out of God’s gift of love.

*The Gospel of Love.* In the other three Gospels, love language is rather sparse. In the Gospel of John, love language occurs more than forty times. Its use in our text probably is the most familiar of all NT texts. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” Here love (*agapē*) is not a sentiment but an action that seeks the good for the beloved. That self-giving love reaches its “finishing,” lifted up on the cross and intended to draw all to itself (12:32). Jesus’ resurrection puts God’s affirming stamp on the cross as love lifted up to reign over the world and to be the source of life “from above” for all who receive it.

God’s intention is never to condemn but to save, that is, to make life whole. Salvation language is health language, God’s health for all the world in all of life’s relationships. That love is ever constant, but never coercive. It is invitational and hopes for a response, to complete the circle of love and share in the interconnectedness of the creating, liberating, healing Holy Trinity.

PAUL L. HAMMER

## Homiletical Perspective

God’s life. God’s seeking is not brought about by our circumstance, our worthiness, our sufficient understanding. Rather, that seeking derives from the anguish of God, God’s longing for the work of God’s hands. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world God created might be saved. So how might we live in that kingdom where life is reborn?

In the rain forest of Olympic National Park in Washington State stand groves of towering trees, the source of whose life is not visible, yet is apparent. The roots of these trees fan out like ribs of an umbrella, seemingly embracing the air for support, for these trees were given birth by nurse logs. Nurse logs are fallen trees, left to lie on the earth until they crumble into dust. But before they disintegrate, something else transpires: A seed falls on the downed log, draws nourishment from the log even as that log decays, and creates roots that ultimately surround an empty space through which the wind blows.

The snapshot of a tree with ribbed umbrella roots above ground embracing only the wind takes us behind such a picture to contemplate origins and interpret reality with new eyes, eyes that expect the unexpected, look to new truths, and come to understand the world in new ways. Such contemplation suggests the offer of a kingdom of communion whose realm we can realize only if we accept it, trust in a relationship between death and life beyond our imagination, new life bestowed by the giving of life, a Giver as real as the wind. Living with faith in this God’s reality, we have and will have life eternal.

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