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John 3:1-21

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***3Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He 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.” 3Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4Nicodemus 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?” 5Jesus answered******,*** ***“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8The 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.” 9Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?******11“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. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.******14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life******. 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. 17“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******.*** ***18Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”***

Nicodemus is my new Biblical hero.

That may be surprising given that in today’s text Nicodemus is the guy who didn’t get it. A rich Pharisee, member of the high standing Sanhedrin, he was a part of the Jewish temple authorities who knew things. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” Being the group who knew things about Jewish law, someone of their group wouldn’t want to be seen asking Jesus anything. So Nicodemus came at night. Say, um, Jesus. You got a minute? See, we know that you’re from God because of those signs that you do….

“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” says Jesus, interrupting Nicodemus with a non sequitur, answering a question that wasn’t even asked. Yeah, no, it’s not about the signs. Lots of people are going around doing signs. There are better reasons to know that I am from God, than looking for signs. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,”

The word for “born from above” and “again” are the same word but Nicodemus only hears the word “again” when Jesus spoke. Nicodemus knows that being born a second time is scientifically and biologically impossible. Nicodemus, like me, would have been confused by the question even. Staying with it though, he responds, “How can one be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8The 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.”

Nicodemus’ response is just like mine would have been. Still confused, still amazed, still looking for an answer that made sense, still asks, “But how can this be?”

You can just hear Jesus sighing, “You’re a teacher. You’re supposed to know this stuff.” Or maybe, “You’re a teacher, you’re supposed to understand new things.” So Jesus begins again, offering a third teaching. And with that, Nicodemus, who only shows up in the Gospel of John, disappears until a minor entrance in chapter 7. We don’t know how long Nicodemus stayed, or how he felt while he was listening and later. We can only guess whether his night visit to Jesus left him inspired to learn more later, or to give up, maybe being a little humiliated. More likely, just confused. There was something compelling and mysterious about Jesus that entered Nicodemus’ heart in the first place. My guess is that Nicodemus would ponder these things. I’m a fan of pondering.

Jesus begins the third teaching from today’s text with his standard words, 11“Very truly, I tell you,” he says. “…we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. 17“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. 18Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Here is where it is important to remember that this particular gospel writer was very different from the other three. John’s gospel is the most spiritual and mystical of the four. John’s gospel writes about eternal life. This gospel was written anywhere from 60 to 80 years after Jesus’ death so his sources are completely different and don’t include any first person accounts. The gospel of John is the gospel story but from the added perspective of 60 years of integration, reflection and interpretation. His use of language about ascending and descending, lifting up, light and dark, earthly things vs. heavenly things, Son of Man, eternal life, water, wind and spirit are unique. The writing in this gospel takes on more of the strategy of a creative writer say, than a journalist, in that there are many metaphors and word play, and the purpose is to evoke emotion, thought, curiosity, not just state facts.

For example, here Jesus says that “14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” “Lifted up” meant both physically lifted up into the air, as well as lifted up as in exalted. When Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness it was a sign that his knowledge was from heaven, was from God. Making the analogy here, John was giving Jesus the same authority from God and points to the crucifixion as that which lifts Jesus up and exalts him. Whereas Moses ascended to the mountain and received knowledge of God, Jesus descended first from God with that knowledge of God.

And another example. Jesus describes perishing vs. eternal life. Perishing doesn’t mean death and eternal life doesn’t refer to an “endless duration of human existence.” John writes about judgment and eternal life as central themes in all of the gospel. Putting Jesus’ words in the present tense is an important part of John’s message. Eternal life “is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God.” To perish means not living that life. “Eternal life is one of the dominant metaphors…to describe the change in human existence wrought by faith in Jesus." These are things that happen during our lives.

This text also puts God’s love at the center of Jesus’ presence with us, not only God’s will. . God did not come to judge. God gave his son out of love. The judging is what we will do to ourselves.

Whole books can be and have been written to fully explore the many aspects of this entire text, sometimes a few words at a time. God’s love. God sent. Eternal Life. World. The theology is fascinating and deep. Probably the most well known verse is John 3:16, “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.” Just the words in this one line – love, world, gave (not sent), perish, eternal life have such wide and deep meanings, that to take that one line alone without the context of the rest can be limiting. I enjoyed the comparison of one commentator who said, “It reminds me of a violinist I know who gets a little depressed every November, as she contemplates another season of The Nutcracker performances.” Her friend says, “I know it’s an orchestra classic that comes with the territory, and I’m glad for the work,” she says, “but I really wish people knew there was more to the repertoire than ‘The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.’”1

For me, this entire text, not just one line, emphasizes the love inherent in an encounter with Jesus, knowing that God’s will is for me to feel love in that encounter, and also begins to show how that love is directly tied to the source of that change – the lifting up and exalting of Christ that came with the cross.

This is why Nicodemus is my new biblical hero. We don’t know what happened to him after this encounter we read of today. But in the third of three appearances in the gospel of John, Nicodemus must have come to some decision. Because only in the gospel of John, is Nicodemus named as the second of the two (Joseph of Arimathea was the second, named in every other gospel) who came to take Jesus’ body off of the cross and prepare the body for burial. Nicodemus arrived in chapter 3, knowing some things, confused about the new things Jesus described, but by chapter 20, he showed up. When we think of our encounters with Jesus in our lives, maybe a few moments at a time, maybe in music, or in nature, or in relationships, we might feel the same way. Awed at the love, we move forward unsure, hoping to stay in the light, hoping our actions reflect the love shown to us, remembering that we are so loved by God that God’s hope for us is that we be changed by an encounter with God’s son. I’m not sure any of us remembers that every single moment of every single day, but like Nicodemus, we listen and learn and feel and act. We can only hope to stay the road and show up when it matters.

Let us pray,

Florence, Anna Carter, Feasting on the Word Commentary Series, Year A, Vol. Lent thru Eastertide, p.69