

John 3:1-17^{v vi}

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "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. 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."

^v **About the Gospel: John 3:1-17**

This discourse as a whole (3:1-21) moves from the work of the Spirit (3:3-8) to that of the Son (3:10-15) to that of the Father (3:16-21). Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, explains his interest as being caused by the signs Jesus has performed. Jesus seeks to draw him past these outward manifestations to a recognition of the inward significance of his activity.

The discussion begins on the meaning of being born, or “begotten,” “from above” (v. 3). In Greek, this phrase has two meanings. The first is “anew, again”—temporally—which is what Nicodemus understands on the physical level; the second is “from above”—spatially—which is what Jesus seems to intend.

Jesus contrasts the realm of the Spirit, which is eternal and heavenly, with the realm of flesh, which is earthly, weak and mortal (but not necessarily sinful). Both flesh and spirit constitute human existence, but the Spirit is life itself. The life that the Spirit gives is not under human control, not anthropocentric, but theocentric, as shown by the illustration of the wind blowing where it will. Both the Greek and the Hebrew words for wind also mean spirit and breath.

^{vi} **Reflection and Response**

We stand on holy ground. That truth resonates throughout today’s readings, reminding us of the essential sacredness of our experience, throughout all times and seasons.

The sacred character of human life springs from our intimate connection with the triune deity. God’s self-identification to Moses is not that of some distant figure, aloof from human life. Instead, he is the God of people: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. If we substitute the names of our own parents or loved ones, we get the message. God is part and parcel of that most close and frustrating human relationship.

To see our ordinary days in this divine light takes a special gift of the Spirit. Elusive as the wind, it inspires and empowers us, enabling us to rise above our mortal limitations and place our lives in the context of the holy. The normal bounds of our thinking can be utterly shattered and expanded, just as Moses’ were when he saw a bush burning, yet not consumed.

The same irony is present as we realize that we are deeply human, yet somehow more than that. Redemption by Jesus implies that although we are doomed to die, we also inherit eternal life. The implications of that fact should brighten the dusty surface of our days.

We older folk become as skeptical as Nicodemus about the possibilities for rebirth. The noted teacher is quite willing to admit that the signs Jesus does mark him as one who lives in the presence of God. Yet the next step Jesus asks him to take is the difficult one: acknowledging that any person can see God’s kingdom as clearly, enter into this reign and be born of the Spirit.

In so doing, Paul says, we become joint heirs with Christ, suffering with him so that we can also share his glory. It is our union with Christ that makes all ground holy: our affections, our work, our suffering and triumphs.