

# “START ACTING LIKE A CHILD”

Message for the Second Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

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GENESIS 12: 1-4a \*\* ROMANS 4: 1-5, 13-17 \*\* JOHN 3: 1-17

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

**I**n our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus offers Nicodemus the opportunity to journey into the wilderness, not by giving up a geographical home as Abram and Sarai do in the Genesis text, “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’ and concludes with ‘So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.’” Nicodemus is giving up all that he knows about the territory of his soul and spirit, by giving up his familiar inner environment.

As we travel together through this scripture, it is important to remember that the story was written into our holy texts not because it tells us something about Nicodemus but because it tells us something about ourselves. The dialog between Nicodemus and Jesus is given to us as a mirror reflecting our own questions, and, I suspect, our own resistance to giving up what is safe and familiar!

The central question that Nicodemus asks is: How can anyone be born after having grown old? Jesus responds that one is born a second time not of flesh, but of water and ‘Pneuma’ or breath, wind, Spirit.

Any Christian disciple knows that the water of Baptism signifies a new birth. It is obviously not a new physical birth in the body; we don’t ‘enter a second time into our mother’s womb’ as Nicodemus suggests. But it is a new birth during which we accept a new name: disciple.

Show of hands, How many of you like to change? Seriously how many of you like to change? What if I asked you if you wished you were still a baby?

It seems we have a gut reaction to the idea of change, especially in church. We think it's a negative thing, a scary thing. The idea of change opens up doors that can seem risky. What might happen next? Often, it appears, we'd rather not know.

The story of the call of Abram is about change. Before we discuss that part, there's a couple of things worth noting. First is the shorter version of his name, Abram, it's not a typo. Second God does not ask Abram to leave, but rather he tells him to. Not in a negative or angry way, necessarily, but without room for debate. The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

In those days that was almost exclusively a negative thing. This is long before the days of email, texting, or a quick phone call to the folks back home, even before 'snail mail.' To leave meant "Go and don't plan on ever coming back." It's not some casual think about it and let me know leave but leave; there is a finality to it all.

Next Sunday is the first day of Daylight Savings Time; we turn our clocks ahead which seems like we did just yesterday!. It will be darker when we wake up but we have more daylight at the end of the day. For now, it's darker in the mornings. Our gospel story today takes place in the wee morning hours between Nicodemus and Jesus.

There are nocturnal animals who spend their active hours in the night, but that doesn't come naturally for we humans. If we're up at night, something's going on.

Sometimes people do things in the night so as to conceal their actions. The case of Nancy Guthrie is a case in point. She was taken from her home and her bed around 1am in the morning. As of today, sadly, that case still remains open and she has never been found. We pray for her recovery, however that may be.

It's also hard to get around when it's dark. Streets look different in the middle of the night than they do in daylight. The familiar landmarks are lost in the darkness. The shadowy landscape leaves us uncertain.

And then when you do encounter a bright light, it's quite blinding. Oncoming headlights glare and eclipse everything around them.

We're just not built for the nighttime and the darkness.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a very religious person. He tries to walk a holy pathway aligned with God. He finds himself attracted to Jesus' ministries, like a moth to a streetlight. He wants to meet Jesus, but he wants to hide his interest. So he visits Jesus under the cover of darkness. In the middle of the night, he comes face to face with the light of the world, and he's simply blinded.

Jesus engages Nicodemus in a theological discussion. First, he tells him that he needs to be born anew. Nicodemus just can't understand this.

We tune in today when Jesus mentions an instance that happened to the Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness. The people began to complain for the umpteenth time. They wish they'd never left Egypt. God punishes their lack of faith by sending poisonous snakes into their camp.

When they repent, God instructs Moses to make an image of a serpent out of bronze and lift it high on a pole for all to see. Whenever anyone was bitten by a snake, they'd look at the bronze serpent and be healed.

So the means of their salvation looks like the means of their judgment. God works restoration and healing through an object that looks like the very thing that poisoned them.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that God is about to do something very similar. God is going to transform a moment of judgment into one of salvation. The cross, a vehicle of judgment and condemnation, will become the means by which God brings salvation to the world. Jesus will be lifted up on his cross and become the object of our salvation.

God will turn it upside-down. An action that was meant to condemn will be used to save. God's intention is to save, not to condemn. That's because the heart of God, what is the motivating engine behind all that God does, is love. God loves, and love wants to save. Love doesn't wish the worst for the beloved. Love wants the best. Love desires blessing, not curse.

And so God is about to take this means of scorn and condemnation, and transform it into the vehicle for the salvation of the world. Jesus will be lifted up on his cross, just as the bronze serpent was years ago. And all who look up and gaze at him will be redeemed. Death will be turned into life. Sorrow will change into joy.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the middle of the night. Under the cover of darkness, he comes to see the Light of the World. What he beholds is too blinding for his nocturnal eyes.

We're very much like Nicodemus, you and I. We spend our whole lives trying to come into the light, seeking the light. We try to make sense of the fullness of Jesus' healing light, but the brilliance of his salvation is too much for us to fully comprehend. We're unable to grasp the true depth and breadth of Christ's healing light.

Like Nicodemus, in this life we will remain somewhere between the darkness of night and the graying of dawn. For now, we only capable of seeing dimly.

But when we depart this life, then we shall step into the dawning of Christ's great light. It will be the light that emanated from Christ's tomb on that first Easter, the light no darkness can overcome. And then we shall, at last, see face to face. We'll know in full, just as we have been fully known by the divine.

But now, for we who dwell in deep darkness, this light of love is something that we can't fully comprehend. Our brother, Nicodemus, came at night, and when he left it was still night. So long as we're in this world, the same is true for us.

But what we have now is the sign that's been given to us. We look up and see Jesus lifted on the cross. This is the sign of healing given to us. It's the sign – not of condemnation – but of salvation. We gaze upon this sign of grace given: our savior, lifted high above us. Through this sign we see the full length and breadth and depth of the divine love that embraces our world. Do we understand it? No, not fully, not even half of it. But we lift our eyes, and we behold.

Nicodemus was an incredibly good man. He was honest to the core. As I said, he was a Pharisee. Pharisees were extremely serious about keeping the rules and he was very, very good. Now understand I'm not talking about just keeping the Ten Commandments. No, the Pharisees didn't worry about keeping them because over the years they also added another 633 rules to enable them to keep those Ten Commandments. You see, the Pharisees were serious about their goodness.

For example: they wanted to know how far one could walk on the Sabbath without breaking the Sabbath. How far could one walk before it was considered work? What could you carry without it being considered work? They arrived at this answer: "You could walk 2000 yards but not one step more. That would be

considered work. You could not lift a pot nor light a fire on the Sabbath, so food would have to be prepared the day before and eaten cold. Yet Jesus reminded them that they broke their own rules and could save a donkey if it fell into a well on the Sabbath.

Nicodemus was doing his level best to keep the rules as a Pharisee. He was depending on his goodness, his Jewish genetics, his blood connection to Abraham to earn God's favor and a place in heaven.

He was doing a pretty good job. He had religious credentials. He worked for the Jewish high council; He spoke the correct religious language. Good enough to be a card carrying member of the Jewish ruling council. He was one of the 70 special elders of the Jewish nation. Furthermore, he was a Teacher of Israel. He had the credentials to interpret and teach others what the Holy Scriptures were saying, but he could not see the "light" right in front of him, but a flicker of light brought him to Jesus one night.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night... He came at night because he did not want his brother Pharisees to know his anxiety, his insecurity. Nicodemus knew his broken rules could not be forgotten.

This is basically the conversation: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. I have kept all of the rules and forms and rituals of our faith. Jesus interrupts and turns to Nicodemus: "You must be born again." Well, what does that really mean?

Jesus: "What I'm talking about is that you can not rely on your family history, your goodness, your Jewishness to open the doors to heaven. I'm the replacement. In the future, heaven's doors are opened by the Spirit giving faith in me as the Savior."

You must be born from above or "Born Again." This is a term not used by Lutherans but it is heard a lot. So what does it mean? For some Christian denominations the words "Born again" means that there was a moment in time in which, like Nicodemus, you were blind to the light and truth of Jesus as your Savior, and then there was an event or emotional moment when you made a decision that Jesus was the answer and the darkness in your life was shattered.

As a Lutheran I would answer: "Who enabled you to make that decision? The answer is simple. The Holy Spirit. "I believe that I can not by my own reason or

strength believe....but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel..."

What "born again" means is that either in your baptism or through some other experience, the Holy Spirit enables you to believe that Jesus is your personal Savior, that His grace, His forgiveness, His promise of eternal life, is a gift.

As the conversation comes to a conclusion Jesus states what might be the most important verse in the New Testament. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert" and all who looked at it were healed from the deadly poisonous bites that brought death. So also, "when I, the Son of Man is lifted up on a cross, anyone who believes in me will have eternal life." "Indeed God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." In some ways, verse 17 suffers from understandable neglect, coming as it does on the heels of what Martin Luther called "the heart of the Bible" and "the gospel in miniature, the gospel in a nutshell."

Many people still miss the Savior's point. People get so wrapped up in the words "being born again," being born from above that they get confused as did Nicodemus. Unfortunately many people today have the same mindset as Nicodemus. People think that without any outside assistance, if we are "good enough" God will say: "Wow! You really do deserve my grace. You really are a good person. I am so overwhelmed by the way you've lived your life, I'm going to invite you into heaven."

Because Jesus loves you, He endured, He suffered, He sacrificed, and He died. Because He loved you, He gave Himself over to the whip, the thorns, the blows, the nails, and the cross. Because Jesus loved you, He gave Himself as the ransom that would give forgiveness and salvation to all who believe on Him. And with His resurrection from the dead, we know God's gift has been given, His love is revealed and all who believe on the Christ as their suffering substitute and victorious Redeemer 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."

**AMEN!!**