

5 March 2023
Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Unmasking Jesus”
Text: John 3:1-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever been in a conversation where you're just not communicating? You're trying! You're talking about the same thing, you're using the same words, and yet, somehow, you're not connecting. You're talking past each other.

That's what's happening with Jesus and Nicodemus in the account we heard today. Except they're not talking past each other like this [*hands moving past each other horizontally*], they're talking past each other like this [*hands moving past each other vertically*].

For, you see, and as we heard, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. And the Pharisees were all about the Law - studying and knowing the Law, keeping and explaining the Law, and doing all the Law. They were dedicated and sincere and wanted to please God - not working on the Sabbath, paying a tithe of everything, memorizing Scripture, and more. And they were admired for it. People looked up to them. They were the good guys! Except their thinking wasn't quite right. For they thought that keeping the Law and doing all the right things would make them good, and good with God. For the Pharisees, it was all about what they did.

And many people think that way still today. That all religion, whether it be Christianity or something else, is all about being good - whatever good means. It's about what we do.

But notice that's not how Jesus talks. So, Nicodemus comes to Jesus one night and this is what he wants to learn. He wants to learn what more he could be doing, or doing better, to reach the kingdom of God. He calls Jesus **Rabbi**, an honorable title, someone he can learn from. He says, ***you are a teacher come from God*** - we all know that - ***for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him***. Nicodemus isn't stupid. And yet, he can't understand what Jesus tells him. Because Nicodemus is thinking this way [*hand moving up*] while Jesus is speaking this way [*hand moving down*]. So what Nicodemus needs what we all need: not just facts or information or a checklist of what to do or do better - what Nicodemus needs, and what we all need, is **a new way of thinking**. Not an *us doing for God* way of thinking, but a *God doing for us* way of thinking.

So that's what Jesus does with His words that we heard today. And He does it three times, in three ways, with three examples: with birth, with the wind, and with the bronze serpent episode from the Old Testament.

So first, with birth. Jesus says: *you cannot see, you cannot enter the kingdom of God unless you are born again*, (or born from above, that could also be translated); *born of water and the Spirit*. But the key word here is **born**. And the thing about being born is that you had nothing to do with it. You don't choose your parents, you didn't choose to be conceived, and, in fact, when it came time for you to be born and come out of your mother and into the world, you didn't want to do that! You wanted to stay in your nice cozy place but your Mom pushed you out! Being born is something that happens to you, not something that you can do.

Now, Nicodemus doesn't get it, because he's thinking this [*hand moving up*], right? So, befuddled, he blabbers something about climbing back up inside your mother. So Jesus tells him: No, Nicodemus. This isn't a physical rebirth, but a spiritual one. Just as you were born physically, so you need to be born spiritually. You need a new life that comes only **from above**, only **by water and the Spirit**. You need a new life that comes not from you moving up but by God coming down.

We're not told if Nicodemus said anything in response to that. But the next words are from Jesus, who says: **Do not marvel** . . . So I imagine Nicodemus just sitting there with his mouth open! He's expecting Jesus to tell him what more he needs to do and Jesus is telling him the complete opposite. He doesn't get it.

So Jesus goes to **His second example: the wind**. Everybody knows about the wind. You can see it, you can feel it, but you can't cause it or control it. I'd like to! If I could, I'd stop the wind from blowing my neighbor's leaves into my yard in the Fall! And wouldn't it be nice to be able to stop tornados and hurricanes. But like the wind, spiritual life and the work of the Spirit don't happen because of what we do; the kingdom of God and the work of the Spirit are not our work. The Spirit comes down to us and works when and where He wills, not when and where we will. We're not the doers, we're not the ones in control, He is. Again, it's all about God coming to us, not us going to God.

Poor Nicodemus! He's used to being the teacher but he's the one getting schooled! At this point, all he can utter is simple *What? How? . . . How can these things be?*

Which leads Jesus to **His third example: the bronze serpent**. This is a story Nicodemus would have known well, perhaps even taught to others. That when the people of Israel were getting what they deserved, being bitten by fiery serpents for grumbling against God and accusing Him of wronging them (when it was really them sinning against God all along!), God - in His mercy - provided a way out for them: the bronze serpent on a pole. But it wasn't really the image that did anything (how could it?) - but God attached His

Word and promise to that image, that whoever was bitten and looked at that image, would live. They could *try* to save themselves, by what they could do, but life comes only from God and where He puts it. What He does.

And I think Nicodemus would have agreed with that. I kind of picture him nodding his head when Jesus is talking about the bronze serpent - he gets that. So that's when Jesus tells him what that really means . . . **Jesus pulls the mask off the bronze serpent.**

Now, I've never see this TV show - maybe you have - but I've seen ads for it: *The Masked Singer*. Have you seen it? From what I can tell, there's a celebrity in a costume with a mask on. They sing, and the contestants have to try to figure out who it is. I don't know if they ever get it right - but the ads always show them as being surprised. That's what Jesus does now, here, for Nicodemus. He pulls the mask off the serpent and says: **this is really a picture of how God will save the world.** It is the Son of Man, it is God's own Son who will be lifted up on a pole of sorts, on the cross, that **whoever believes in Him**, whoever looks to Him there in faith, will **not perish but have eternal life**. You can *try* to save yourself, by what you do, but eternal life comes only from God and where He puts it. What He does.

So that bronze serpent was a little salvation, a little saving. The Son of God would come to do the big salvation, the big saving, of the whole world. ***For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*** Saved by what God does. Saved by the God who comes down to us.

For the truth is that we've all been bitten. The fiery serpent has sunk his teeth into us and injected us with the poison of sin and death. But God, in His mercy, has provided us a way out of death to life. And it's 100% Him. His doing. All you can do is die. And that's what we do, right? We sin and mess up. We hurt and get hurt. We kill friendships, marriages, families, some kill babies, old people they don't want around anymore, and even themselves. Wars kill, drugs kill, drunk drivers kills. We want to live, but we look around and all we see is death. Which is what God said in the beginning, to Adam and Eve, of that one tree: *the day you eat of it, you will surely die* (Genesis 2:17). They did eat of it, and we've been dying ever since.

But that same day that death came into the world - which is what *we* did, trying to [*hand moving up*] be like God and become God - that same day life also came back into the world, because God came. He came to Adam and Eve. They didn't go to Him, they ran away from Him, in fact, as we heard last week. But He came to them [*hand moving down*], and gave them His Word and promise to give them life again. To provide a way. It wouldn't easy, for them or for Him. It would involve death. Death to defeat death. But He would do it. *For* them.

And part of this struggle would be to overcome the poison of sin that has been injected

into us, the poison that keeps making us think *we can do it*. Or that we must do something. I think this is what the words of the Collect of the Day were talking about. First we said that *of ourselves we have no strength*. We can't do what need to be done. We don't have it in us. So, we went on, *By Your mighty power - YOUR mighty power*, not ours - *defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and* - and here's the key phrase - *all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul*. And what are those? Thoughts of anger and hatred, impure thoughts, sure. But the chief evil thought that assaults and hurts the soul is that the kingdom of God, that religion, that spirituality, is somehow what we do. That's an evil thought that assaults and hurts the soul because it takes our focus OFF what God has done and is doing for us, and puts our attention on what we are doing.

Now, as with all false teaching, there's a kernel of truth here. We do good works. We do live new lives. Or at least, we should. *But they are derivative*. That is, they are secondary. That is, what God does comes first and can never be forgotten or taken for granted. Before we can live a new life we have to receive that new life. Before we can ascend, the Son of God must descend to us.

And He has. Which is what this season of Lent is all about. Not what we do for God, but what He has done for us. Not our love for God, but that ***God so loved the world***. Not that we clean ourselves up, but that He has washed us in **Baptism** and given us that new birth of water and the Spirit. Not that we feed ourselves and become strong, but that He feeds us with Jesus' Body and Blood and we receive His strength. Pull the mask off Baptism and Communion and that's what's there - Jesus and His life and salvation. God for you. God coming to you. *Of ourselves we have no strength*, but here, with these, of Him, in Him, we have His strength. And we have His life. Which is a life that death can no longer end. *Even though we will die, yet shall we live* (John 11:25).

We need a season like Lent to re-orient us again, to be like Nicodemus and listen to Jesus again. To focus us again on God for us, God coming to us, God giving us life and new life. To repent of the thoughts that have made their homes in our minds again, that by being good we can somehow make God love us more, when God has already ***so loved the world that He gave His only Son!*** He can't love you more than He already does. So He came for you and died for you and rose for you, and now comes for you to work that in you. That you be one of the ***whoever*** - the whoever ***who believe in him and do not perish*** (from your snake bite) ***but have eternal life***.

How can these things be? Nicodemus asked. Maybe you have the same question. Especially, how can it be that God loves me? After all I've done, after all I've messed up, after all my sin and all that I still do wrong and fail to do right! ***How can this be?*** When we fix our eyes on ourselves, we'll question and doubt because of our sin, and rightly so. But that's why Lent calls us to fix our eyes on Jesus (Gradual). And while we still may not know how this can be, we'll know that it is. Because when we fix our eyes on Jesus,

we see that love, we see His life, and what could we say that but **thanks be to God!**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.