

"How Can These Things Be?"

John 3:1-17

March 12, 2017

Second Sunday in Lent

Many people spend lots of time trying to figure out how God works. How do we know God? How can we be in relationship with God? How do we receive God's blessing? For millenia, people have debated this topic. Some think they have God all figured out only to find out that they don't have a clue. Such is the case in our text today for a man named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was certainly well qualified to tackle this topic. He was a Pharisee which means he was very religious and knew the Scriptures well – what they taught about God and, especially, what they taught us to do. He was also a ruler of the Jews which meant that he was a member of the Sanhedrin which was sort of the Jewish Supreme Court and decided all religious and political questions for Israel. He probably felt that he had God all figured out.

Nicodemus had observed Jesus and paid attention to His words and actions. He wanted to understand more so he comes to talk to Jesus. He comes at night when he wouldn't be observed talking to Jesus because Jesus was not well thought of by his fellow Pharisees and colleagues on the Sanhedrin. But Nicodemus had an open mind and was willing to listen to what Jesus had to say about Himself.

Nicodemus began by saying, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." While Nicodemus respects Jesus as a Rabbi – a teacher, he really wants talk about the miraculous signs that Jesus was doing. The Jews believed that God worked through miraculous signs and, to find God, you had to find the signs. Signs were visible, powerful, and glorious. Nicodemus was convinced that Jesus was from God because He could do miraculous signs.

But Jesus doesn't pay any attention to Nicodemus's comment about signs. Jesus takes the conversation off into a different direction. Jesus doesn't want to talk about visible, powerful, and glorious signs of God. Jesus talks about the necessity of people being born again to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus describes this, not as a physical birth (which Nicodemus understood it to be), but as a birth of water and the Spirit. To top it off, Jesus says the work of the Spirit is not visible, powerful, and glorious, but it is like the wind. As the wind goes where it wants and you can hear it but not see it, so it is with the Spirit of God. He goes where He wants and you can see evidence of His work, but you can't see the Spirit.

By this time, Nicodemus is all sorts of confused. He thought had God all figured out – how He acts and how people come into His Kingdom through mighty signs and the seeking of those signs. But Nicodemus, out of frustration and confusion, finally says to Jesus, "How can these things be?"

Perhaps you've felt the same way. You think that you have God figured out. You are convinced that God shows His power and proves His presence through miraculous events that occur in your life. So you look for God, as the Jews did, by looking for signs. You know God is present because He keeps you safe in a big storm or protects you in a bad car accident. You may react to such things by saying, "God was sure with me during that." You feel God's power in your life because He cures you of some horrible disease or provides some unexpected money in your life when you really needed it. You say, "God is good."

The problem with looking for God in signs is what happens when you don't see signs and can't find God. Is God not present with people when their houses are destroyed in tornadoes or they are badly injured in a car accident? Is God no longer good when your disease is not cured or you can't pay your bills? We may try to believe harder or act better so that see more miraculous signs from God.

The problem for Nicodemus and for us as well is that, as sinful human beings, we fail to understand how God really works, how we are to approach Him, and how we are to know of His presence and power. Like the Jews of Jesus' day, we may spend our time looking for signs from God in miraculous actions and being disappointed or confused. In addition, we may end up missing out on how God really does work, His presence, and how to approach Him. Like Nicodemus, we may end up throwing our hands in the air and say, "How can these things be?"

Jesus gently and patiently helps Nicodemus understand "these things" and He does the same for us, too. First, we don't have to go out, looking for Jesus. Jesus says, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." We are used to seeking out and finding those things which good and beneficial to us. Many apply that to their spiritual lives and think they have to go out and "find" Jesus. But Jesus was never lost. We are lost because of our sinful rebellion against God.

We have left Him. But we don't have to go out and find Him. We don't have to ascend to heaven to look for Him there (as if we could). Instead, He descends from heaven and comes down to us. He takes the initiative and comes to us because we wouldn't and couldn't come to Him.

Secondly, we should not expect to experience the power and glory of God as the world defines power and glory. Jesus displays His glory and power to us in ways that are unusual to us but perfectly in keeping with the God's will and way of doing things. He references a story from the Old Testament which you may remember from Sunday School. The people of Israel were in the desert and became very impatient with Moses' leadership. They complained that they had no food or water and complained about the food and water God sent them. So, God sent poisonous snakes to bite the people and many died. The people asked Moses to pray that the Lord would take the snakes away. So Moses did. The people were probably expecting God to show His power and crush the snakes. Instead, God showed no noticeable power or glorious cure. He told Moses to make a bronze snake, lift it up on a pole, and everyone who looks at it would live. It didn't look too impressive or glorious, but it worked. All who looked to the uplifted snake on the pole lived.

In the same way, Jesus came to reveal the power and glory of God in a very unpowerful and unglorious way. He says, "And 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." Jesus would bring salvation and eternal life through a very weak and shameful way: His own death on a cross. "Jesus showed forth His glory not in spite of His earthly humiliations, but precisely by means of these humiliations." (Morris, p.226) "To the outward eye [the cross] was the uttermost in degradation, the death of a felon. To the eye of faith it was (and is) the supreme glory." (Morris, p.226) Looking to Jesus in faith brings eternal life.

Third, we receive His gifts and experience His presence in ways that may seem unusual to many people. While many look for spectacular signs, God works in very quiet and humble ways. Instead of going out and doing something to get God's gifts and experience His presence, He comes to us and we passively receive what He gives. He compares it with birth. How many of you played an active role in your birth – deciding when and how to be born? Being born is passive. We don't do it. It happens to us.

Being born again is the same way. We are born sinful and spiritually dead. To be in the presence of God and receive His forgiveness, salvation, and life, we have to become completely new and different people. Hence, we must be born again. It's not something you do, but something done to you through water and the Spirit of God, namely, baptism. Through baptism, you are new and different people and members of the kingdom of God. You have the life and salvation won by Jesus' humble death and glorious resurrection bestowed on you in your baptism.

All of that is the result of the Holy Spirit acting on you and you passively receiving it. You can no more grasp or control the Holy Spirit than you can the wind. Jesus says the Spirit is like the wind (in fact, the same Greek word is used for Spirit and wind). The wind goes where it wants to. You hear it but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. The Holy Spirit is the same. The Spirit works where and how He wills. We can see evidence of the Holy Spirit working when faith is created, but we don't know where the Spirit comes from or where He is going. Therefore, we continue in His Word, the Holy Scriptures, and allow Him to work in us.

The quarterback of a certain NFL team in northern Wisconsin was asked a couple of years ago to respond to the panic fans of the team were experiencing after a lengthy losing streak. His response was short and sweet, "R-E-L-A-X!" Despite the fear of the fan base, the team went on an extended winning streak and had a good season (but no Super Bowl). In the same way, if you feel fear or panic about seeing no signs of God's power, no signs of God's glory, no signs of God's presence and no signs of God's gifts, I would say to you, "R-E-L-A-X!" God has come down to you in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus has shown His power and presence through His death on a cross. The Holy Spirit has worked in you through the water of Holy Baptism to cleanse you, forgive you, and bring you into the kingdom of God. To answer Nicodemus's question and our question, "THAT'S how these things can be." Amen.