

## SERMON

Let us pray: O Lord may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight our Rock and our Redeemer.

Alleluia Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed Alleluia! My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation this morning is the Holy Gospel according to Saint John chapter nineteen.

Bounce-back toys are popular with small children. Whether it's a clown, a punching bag, or a big plastic bear, these toys don't do a lot. But they can sure bounce back. Knock them down, and they pop back up. Hit them with a bat, punch them in the nose, or give them a karate kick. They will fall down, but not for long. They will always, *always* bounce back.

Today, we meet Nicodemus, who is assisting Joseph of Arimathea with the task of burying Jesus. "Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight" (John 19:39).

Nicodemus earlier in John's Gospel in didn't believe that people could bounce back—*ever*. Why is that? Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and Pharisees kept the Law. Pharisees followed the Ten Commandments. Pharisees paid tithes, guarded the Sabbath, and strictly kept Old Testament regulations and requirements. And they wore long robes.

Nicodemus was also a member of the Jewish ruling council—the Sanhedrin—the seventy-member Jewish Senate. The Sanhedrin judged people according to a book called the *Mishnah*. The Mishnah contains 613 commandments. There is no room for error in the Mishnah. Once you're out, you stay out. Once you're down, you stay down. You can never bounce back.

As a Pharisee *and* a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus believed that there are no second chances. There is no grace. There is no forgiveness. None. Zero. Zilch. Nada. *Never!*

So you'd better be careful. And look over your shoulder. And second-guess yourself. You'd better watch what you wear, how you act, the length of your prayers, and the amount of money you give. Because there's no bouncing back.

Nicodemus first came to Jesus at night (John 3:2). More, however, is going on than just the time of day. Darkness describes people who rebel against Jesus. “The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness” (John 3:19). Remember Judas? He betrayed Jesus. When? “It was night” (John 13:30). Coming to Jesus at night describes Nicodemus. He’s in the dark, just like Judas. Nicodemus is lost in the spiritual darkness of legalism.

The same darkness engulfs us when we don’t believe in second chances, when we won’t forgive, when we refuse to embrace grace, when we won’t turn the other cheek or walk the extra mile. It gets dark—very, very dark.

That’s why Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). There is no chitchat here. No idle talk. Jesus goes straight to the point. Jesus says our best won’t do; our works won’t work. We must be born again. In John 3:1–8, Jesus uses the term “born” eight times—eight times in eight verses! Do you think Jesus is trying to make a point?

How active were you when you were born? Were you talking on a cellphone with your mother, telling her when to push? Did the doctor ask you to measure the contractions and report from inside the womb? Did you place your hands against the top of the womb and push yourself out? Postpartum celebrations applaud the work of the mother, not the child. Mom gets a medal. The child gets a pacifier and a blanket!

Here's the point. We were all passive when we were born. We didn't do a thing. We weren't born because of what we did. Our mother did all the work. The same is true for our spiritual birth. God does all the work.

Do you know the most quoted Bible verse in America? "God helps those who help themselves." But there's a problem with that. It's not in the Bible! God doesn't help those who help themselves, because God knows we cannot help ourselves. God knows that He has to do 100 percent of the work! That's why Jesus uses "born" eight times in eight verses!

Born....we are born again of water and the Spirit! And what's that called? Holy Baptism! The Holy Spirit is really present—in, with, and under the water—creating *new* life!

Martin Luther writes in his Small Catechism that Baptism “works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare” (SC, Baptism, Second Part). The reformer writes in his Large Catechism, “There is no work done here by us, but a treasure, which God gives us and faith grasps” (LC IV 37). Also from his Large Catechism: “Here in Baptism there is freely brought to everyone’s door such a treasure and medicine that it utterly destroys death and preserves all people alive” (LC IV 43).

Nicodemus asked, “How can these things be?” (John 3:9). Start all over? Bounce back because you’re baptized? Nonsense! Nicodemus is still living in the darkness of rules and regulations. And don’t forget his long robes! Jesus answered, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?”

(John 3:10). As Israel's teacher, Nicodemus should have understood that the Old Testament is all about bouncing back.

Abraham worshiped the moon. God called him to bless the world. Moses killed a man. God called him to lead His people out of Egypt. Aaron built a golden calf. God called him to be Israel's first high priest. Jeremiah 31:31 promises a new covenant. Ezekiel 36:26 promises a new heart. And Lamentations 3:22–23 says that God's mercies are new every morning.

God is the Giver. Grace is His idea. Forgiveness comes from Him. Can God really be that generous? that loving? that giving? Yes. Yes. And yes! In John 3:16, Jesus doesn't say, "whoever achieves" or "whoever succeeds." Jesus says, "whoever believes."

Did Nicodemus believe? Did Nicodemus leave the darkness of legalism? Did Nicodemus embrace grace? Recall these words: "Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight" (John 19:39).

Did you know that Ireland is selling castles? If you've ever wanted to live in a castle, here is your chance. Each castle is priced at about \$1. There is a catch, however. According to a *New York Times* article, the historic structures are in advanced stages of disrepair, and buyers must restore each property "consistent with its historical architecture." Estimates for restoration run from \$7 million to \$60 million per castle.

A fixer-upper gives us a picture of what God did for each of us when we were baptized. We were dead, disobedient, depraved, and doomed. But when we were born again through water and the Spirit, we were delivered! God could have said, "I'll make all new things. The old won't do." But instead, God said, "I'll make all things new, even and especially you!"

Imagine that! Nicodemus, the one who came in the dark, now lives in the light. The one who crept through the shadows now comes to the cross. And the one who was caught in the clutches of legalism is now living in the splendor of God's grace. Nicodemus? He bounced back. And so shall we! *Every single*

*time!* May the Peace of God which surpasses all understanding  
Guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.