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John 3: 1-17
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“More Than We Expect”

I know, I know. When you hear this passage, it's hard not to focus on the famous verses.

Verse 3: Is that "born from above" or "born again," and what's the difference?

And, of course, John 3:16: How many times have we seen that chapter and verse, painted on a bed sheet, held up high for the cameras, as the football flies into the netting behind the goalposts?

I'll get to those famous verses soon - I promise. But, for a moment, let's focus on the guy who starts this scene: Nicodemus.

There really is such a thing as getting more than you expected; and boy, oh boy, does Nicodemus get it.

What Nicodemus thinks he has is the right answer - the right answer about who Jesus really is.

You see, even this early in his ministry, Jesus has already performed several remarkable acts: calling the disciples, turning water into wine, casting the money-changers out of the temple. In John's Gospel, these are all called "signs."

But, the problem is that people are paying so much attention to the signs themselves that they aren't paying any attention to what the signs are saying, what they mean.

It's like this: Suppose I'm driving down 86th Street, craning my neck upwards, looking through the windshield, saying, "Wow, look at that! Look at all those traffic lights; they sure do have a lot of them here in Indianapolis." You see the problem: I've focused all my attention on the signs themselves and none on what they're actually saying or signifying and, well, you can bet the crash is coming.

It's like that with Jesus: All kinds of people are saying, "Wow! Did you see that healing?" or, "Wow, look at that! He turned water into wine!" or, "Wow! Did you hear how he threw the money-changers out of the temple?" But, nobody's asking, "What do these things mean? What do they signify?"

Except for Nicodemus. He's a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a learned man. And under cover of darkness (more on that later), he comes to Jesus and says, "Rabbi, you are one of those teachers who come from God. The signs you do show that."

Now a question jumps out here: How does Nicodemus expect Jesus to respond to this?

Well, I don't think it's fair to say that Nicodemus expects only a good grade. After all, even an A+ from Jesus probably won't receive any credit back at the Pharisaic Academy.

But, all the same, Nicodemus takes a risk - he risks his position, his reputation, his prestige - to speak to Jesus. Of course, he tries to lessen that risk by coming at night; but he still comes.

So, what does Nicodemus expect in return? Perhaps some word of acknowledgment, some gesture of appreciation from Jesus.

"Yes, Nicodemus, you got it. I'm glad someone finally understands. That's exactly what my signs mean: I am one of those teachers who come from God."

But, oh boy, does Nicodemus get more than he expected. Jesus says, "Truly, truly I say to you: no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

And now, from here on out, you can just watch Nicodemus' wonder and puzzlement grow and grow and grow.

"You must be born from above - of water and Spirit. You don't know where the Spirit comes from or where it's going; but if you are to be born anew, and you must be if you are to see the kingdom of God, the Spirit must come to you."

Now, if we could see Nicodemus' face there, in the flickering torchlight, I imagine he would look like a high-school freshman who's just sat down in a college calculus class. Eyes wide, mouth agape, the very picture of astonishment because all he can do is blurt out, "How is all of this going to happen?"

And then, Jesus does one of those teacher things. We've probably all had it done to us at one time or another: Jesus says, "And you, a teacher of Israel, and you still don't understand these things?"

In other words, "Where have you been? You ought to know this by now. What have you been doing?" (Maybe we've had this said to us more than once by a teacher, I won't venture.)

But anyway, it's a teacher's tough love: it's love, because he really wants the student to understand. But it's also tough: the teacher says, "You're not there yet and you've got a long way to go."

And Nicodemus isn't the only one to get this tough love. Time and time again, when someone comes to Jesus with a question, rather than answering it, he turns it back on the questioner: "You have the Scripture. How do you read?" In other words, "You should already know the answer to your own question." And, Jesus has good precedent for this tough love. The Old Testament prophets did the same thing.

Do you remember Isaiah's words? "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Hasn't it been told to you from the beginning? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth." But, even though it's tough, you can tell it's still love; Jesus won't leave Nicodemus stuck in his ignorance. In fact, what Jesus says next is, if possible, even more astonishing.

Up to this point, Jesus has spoken to Nicodemus about Nicodemus, about Nicodemus' need for spiritual re-birth. But now, Jesus is going to speak about himself. Nicodemus thought he had the right answer about Jesus' identity; but now Jesus will teach him otherwise and, in the process, he will tell him how all of this is going to happen.

Jesus says no one ascends to heaven except through the one who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man. As Moses, in the wilderness, lifted up the figure of a snake to bring the snake-bitten ones back to life, so the Son of Man must be lifted up to bring all who believe in Him to eternal life.

In other words, Jesus is not just "one of those teachers who come from God." He is the one, the promised one, the long-expected one, the Son of Man, the Messiah, the savior of the world.

Jesus is in truth far greater than Moses. While Moses brought only the snake-bitten ones back to earthly life, Jesus will bring all who believe in Him to eternal life.

Jesus is the one who has come down from heaven and who, when lifted up, will send his Spirit so that we may be spiritually fitted, born again, if you will, for eternal life in God's kingdom.

That's how it's all going to happen, Nicodemus. And you thought you had it all figured out.

Suffice to say that Nicodemus got far more of a response, and a far different one, than he expected.

But, say this for Nicodemus - he may not understand everything he ought to, but he doesn't quit. He displays that one characteristic that John Calvin called the most essential for the Christian life - a teachable spirit.

Because, soon enough, Jesus will be lifted up on a cross to die a criminal's death.

Jesus, the very one who has just dazzled and dumbfounded Nicodemus with these incredible words, will soon be in pain beyond words. Indeed, the only words Jesus can find, as he hangs dying on the cross, are from the opening of Psalm 22. Even those he does not recall in their original Hebrew but in his own native Aramaic.

Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And yet, his body is so broken with pain, his tongue so swollen, cleaving to the roof of his mouth, his agony so great, that he can't even make himself understood to the passersby.

"What did that guy back there say?"
"I don't know, something about Elijah. Does it matter?"
And they walk on.

But not Nicodemus. Later in John's Gospel, immediately after Jesus' crucifixion, as they are taking away the body, we learn that:
Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.

A hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes! A burial fit not for a criminal but for a king, and costing Nicodemus nothing less than a king's ransom.

You have to wonder: why did Nicodemus do it? Certainly, the risk of associating himself with Jesus was even greater now that he had been condemned and executed.

And yet, Nicodemus came, in daylight now, hauling his hundred pounds. Why? A gesture of respect? Certainly, but perhaps more than that, a gesture of hope.

I imagine Nicodemus had spent a good deal of time pondering Jesus' strange and unexpected words from that night - words of the world's salvation; words promising eternal life; words saying that the Son of Man would be lifted up ultimately not to death, but to life and life eternal; and lifted up to eternal life not just for the son of Man, but for all who believe in Him. And all this being the ultimate sign, the true sign, of God's love.

Nicodemus cherished those words; he kept them in his heart; pondered them in his mind; and now here he comes, carrying his hundred pounds of myrrh and aloe, hoping that somehow, in some way he does not understand, those strange and unexpected words of Jesus might still prove true. Nicodemus keeping the faith; hoping at the very moment when things seemed most hopeless. I have to think that Nicodemus had moved a good deal further along the learning curve and that his spiritual rebirth was showing itself to be real.

But enough of Nicodemus and his contemporaries for a moment. What about us in our day?

In our day, John 3:16 is everywhere, as ubiquitous as the traffic lights on 86th Street. Whether it's the whole verse written out, or just the citation of the chapter and verse, it's all over the place.

There's a chain called "In 'n Out Burger" that prints it in on the bottom rim of all their paper cups. It shows up on TV shows and billboards; we see it trailing behind those low-flying airplanes at the beach and scratched into the stalls at public restrooms; drive a few miles out into the country and you're bound to see it on hand-painted signs. It's so ubiquitous that the pro wrestler Stone Cold Steve Austin has taken to referring to his one-sentence philosophy of wrestling (which I won't repeat here) as "Austin 3:16." Go to the arena or turn on the TV and you can see all his fans waving signs, "Austin 3:16."

And yet, for all of that, I wonder whether we're not, in fact, worse off than the contemporaries of Nicodemus. They were so entranced by Jesus' signs that they paid no attention to their meaning. We have signs of Jesus everywhere and we're not only oblivious to their meaning, we're even oblivious to the signs themselves. They're so ubiquitous that we don't even see them anymore.

And yet, John 3:16 has been called the golden text of the Bible, the gospel in a nutshell and the very heart of the gospel.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Hasn't it been told to you from the beginning?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in Him may not perish but have eternal life.

He is God with us - here and now - the Son of God, the one who descended to us to lift us to the Father, the one who sends His Holy Spirit so that we may be born anew for the kingdom of God, the one who comes to give us new life in Him, new life here and now but, also, new life eternal so that we may glorify and enjoy God forever.

I guess it comes as no surprise by now that I have a soft spot for Nicodemus. Nowadays, whenever I see or hear John 3:16 somewhere, I find myself thinking of Nicodemus: how strange and wonderful those words, so familiar to us, must have sounded to him. In fact, I'll confess: I sympathize with Nicodemus, even identify with him.

Something about Jesus, his words and his deeds, moves Nicodemus. Something about Jesus speaks to a deep spiritual hunger in Nicodemus. And yet, Nicodemus is so afraid of what people will say and so afraid that he might be considered, well, you know, "one of them," that he sneaks in and out of the back of the church, hoping that no one will see him.

Been there, done that.

And yet, as much Jesus' words attract Nicodemus, sometimes, as he listens to them, he just sits there, eyes wide, mouth agape - just dumbfounded, utterly clueless.

Been there, and done that.

But, I'd like all of us to identify with Nicodemus in another way, God willing.

You see, in that nighttime encounter with Jesus, Nicodemus got more, far more, than he expected.

And we might too. If we take these words and cherish them, if we keep them in our hearts, if we ponder them in our minds and seek to understand them and to live them, if we take a hold of the Gospel that these words express and if we take a hold of the one who spoke

them, or better, if that Gospel and the one who spoke it take a hold of us, then we too might get more than we expect.

Spiritual rebirth. Faith. Truth. A peace that passes all understanding; an assurance that we are loved and an corresponding ability to love; a joy that passes beyond the walls of this world, new hope, new life, life eternal, the very face of the living God forever and ever.

Have we not known? Have we not heard? Hasn't it been told to us from the beginning?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in Him may not perish but have eternal life.

Amen.