

Last week we introduced the idea that Lent is a journey. A journey with Jesus, doing what Jesus did, learning what Jesus would have us learn & being who Jesus was. The church is most often referred to as the “Body of Christ.” We are the ones that have been called by God to be Jesus presence in the world today. We are the ones who have been called to be the voice of Jesus, the hands, the arms, the legs of Jesus in a world that is in such desperate need of knowing and feeling and experiencing Jesus.

The journey of Lent is, in part, learning about our Master so that we can become who the master wants us to be, with the ultimate goal of introducing more and more people to the Master that we know and that has changed our lives.

Last week we took the first steps in our Lenten journey – steps that began in the wilderness – in temptation. Last week as we prepared for our journey, we examined ourselves. We looked at our motivations, our desires, our wants and we measured them against the intentions of God. This was not done to be some sort of self deprecation – rather – we examine ourselves so that we always can be aware of who we are listening to and who we are following. IN the wilderness, with Jesus, we learned that everything we do, every act of skill, trust and power – to be used according to the purpose it was intended, must be subjugated to God and God’s will for our lives. That’s tough – and maybe that is why they call it the wilderness.

Today we want to move a bit forward to our next stop on the road to Jerusalem and visit with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is an interesting bird. He comes to Jesus, perhaps representing others, in the night to supposedly ask Jesus some questions – questions that he never gets to. When Nicodemus says that “*we know that you are a Rabi sent from God*” because “*nobody can do what you do apart from God,*” Jesus launches into a sermonette about being born again and what that means for those who would truly understand what Jesus is all about.

What I believe Jesus is doing here is challenging Nicodemus’ understanding about what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God and what Kingdom Membership means for those who are a part of the Kingdom.

Remember, Nicodemus is a Pharisee and he comes to Jesus on behalf of other Pharisees. Pharisees were the lovers of the law of Moses – they were the ones charged with the strict keeping of Moses’ law. The word Pharisee in Hebrew is *Prushim* which means “separated.” Pharisees were separated ones who were set aside to live a life of purity. The Pharisees were, depending on the time, a political party, a social movement, and a school of thought among Jews. They believed that ones standing with God depended upon ones adherence to the mosaic law of the Torah, the first 5 books of the Old Testament. Pharisees were known by the Hebrew name *Chasidim* which means “lovers of God” but by the time of Jesus, they

had replaced God with the Law of Moses and so lost their connection with God and God's purpose for them.

So it is really no surprise that Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in the way that he does. Nicodemus comes seeking facts that, like the law, can be read, held, argued and debated. Jesus lets him know that his search is off base from the very beginning. Why? Because he is approaching the idea of the God's plan and purpose from the wrong perspective – the wrong idea – the wrong mentality. Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can really see the Kingdom and know what the Kingdom is all about if that have not been “born again” into the Kingdom.

It is a little nerve wracking for Lutherans to talk about being born again. But I do not believe that this is a proof text for some of our Evangelical brothers and sisters who talk about being “born again.” Being born again is less about what we do and more about what happens to us in and through a relationship with Jesus.

Look around and see what the most pervasive image of God and Christianity exists in the world today? If you were to ask a sampling of people – Christian and non-Christian alike, “*what is the primary disposition of God in relation to humanity?*” In other words, what is the relationship between God and creation look like, I would bet just about anything that you would discover that most people, even those in the church, see that God's primary disposition or role in creation is

that of a judge. The message that so many hear these days when they think about or ponder God is that God will condemn, God will punish, God will send people to hell if they don't straighten up, change their ways and walk the straight and narrow.

That was Nicodemus' view of life. God gave the law and if you want to keep things right in life you had better stick - lock, stock and barrel to the law. Pharisees knew the 10 commandments and all the various nuances of them. They memorized the entirety of the Oral law - every jot and tittle. When someone wanted to know whether or not something was forbidden (e.g. a sin) then they would ask a Pharisee and he could tell you. "What constitutes work on the Sabbath?" "When is adultery REALLY adultery?" "When is lying really lying?" You can see the problem. For the Pharisee and those who followed them, life in relationship with God became a series of legalistic debates and formulas that completely erased the need to know and love and follow God. It's no wonder Nicodemus really did not have a clue what Jesus was all about?

After Jesus' mini sermon, he gets to the real point of what being born again is all about. Verse 16 of John chapter 3 is the most well known verse in all of scripture, I'm sure we could all say it together - *"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."* Verse 17 is not so well known but is really the more important

one to our discussion today. *“Indeed, God did not send the son to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Being born again is something that happens to those who understand and experience what a relationship with God through Jesus is all about. The totality of that understanding is written down for us in John 3:17. You want to know what God is like? You want to know what God is all about? You want to really know the inner workings of the creator of all that is? I’ll tell you God does not condemn, God does not punish, God does not put people in “time outs.” God sends Jesus to save all of creation through him. Why – because God loves the world and God loves you and God loves me. Simple – straightforward – to the point.

*To be born again is to realize that we don’t need to run around seeking and lusting after our own salvation like the Pharisee Nicodemus did.* John McQuiston in his book *“Always We Begin Again”* says that there are specific things that we surrender or should surrender when we become a disciple of Jesus. Some of these include our desire for wealth – because that is demeaning to us and to God. We should surrender our desire for power, prestige and position in life because those are demeaning to our calling as God’s children and we should surrender our search for our salvation because searching for our salvation is inherently selfish.

Think about that on for a moment. A desire for or a search for salvation is selfish. Why is that? Well, I guess because disciples should know that they are already saved, they are already in the Kingdom, they are already a part of God's family and so to continue to seek something that only benefits one's self in, inherently selfish.

Being born again, knowing and experiencing what Jesus says in John 3:17 means that for us we do not need to occupy our time seeking salvation. We already know we are saved, we already have experienced the liberating power of Jesus in our lives, we already know that salvation is a precious and free gift that God has given to us and so we now are free from "needing" to seek salvation for ourselves and so we can seek it for all those people that are living our their lives as if there is no salvation. We can be the bearers of the Good News to those who still see God as a force of condemnation and punishment, a God of endless and unachievable rules and regulations. We can be the ones that speak to those who are living their lives in the darkness of guilt and shame so that they can see and feel what we have seen and felt – the boundless love and acceptance of a God that would desire nothing more than to be a part of our everyday life. That is what comes with being born again – being born of water and the spirit, be born into the Kingdom of God.

Next week, we going to continue this Lenten Journey with a short stop off at a water well in Samaria and we will meet a Samaritan women and we will hear what Jesus tells her about our life together as a church and as a people.