

This Week's Thoughts For Study

John 3:1-17

Close! But No Cigar!

Today marks the second Sunday in the season of Lent, a period of 40 days set aside specifically for Christians to reflect on the events leading up to the death of Jesus. For March, we will be studying four people and their encounters with Jesus. Each came to him with a different need. Each came with a different question. To each, Jesus revealed some part of his mission as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. And each person walked away with a second chance at life, a chance to live a new life because they had met God face-to-face. My prayer is that in this season leading up to Easter every one of us will also get a second chance at a new life.

We begin this week with Nicodemus, a leader among the Pharisees. It's unusual that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, but you could just as readily ask why Nicodemus came to Jesus at all. What was he expecting, what was he looking for? Ever gotten an unexpected visitor? Maybe you've just settled in for the evening, the only plan is to turn off your mind and relax a while. And then the doorbell rings. There go your plans. Who knows what needs are on the other side of that door? All you know is your plans for the evening just got put on hold. One of the better examples comes from 1982 and made international headlines. Early in the morning of July 9, 1982, a young man broke into Buckingham Palace and entered Queen Elizabeth's bedroom. The Queen was still asleep. She was a bit surprised to discover the man standing over her bed wasn't a member of her staff. He reassured her that he wasn't there to hurt her, that he just wanted to talk to her. She sat up and listened as he told her about how hard it was to support his four children after his wife had left him. Amazingly, the break-in had set off numerous Palace alarms, but the security staff ignored them because no one had ever successfully broken in before. Eventually, a member of the household staff came and escorted Michael Fagan out of the Queen's bedroom. Soon the police arrived to arrest him. Unexpected visitors! This story makes me wonder, do you think it set off any alarms in Jesus' mind when Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, came to see him at night? Bible scholars speculate that maybe Nicodemus didn't want to be seen talking to Jesus. He had his reputation and position to protect. In our scripture, we see that Nicodemus doesn't even really know who Jesus is. He's just curious, not committed. And the only thing he's risking is his reputation. In fact, Nicodemus doesn't even seem to have a big question or need that he's bringing to Jesus. At least, not at first. Not until Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." Why did he say that? Because God and the working out of God's kingdom is staring Nicodemus in the face. Even though Nicodemus has heard his teaching and seen his miracles, he doesn't know who Jesus is.

Back in the 1950s, when I was growing up in Philly, one of the things I was allowed to do was to take the ferry down to Wildwood N.J. for the day. I loved to go along the boardwalk and play the games, throwing balls at bottles, shooting air rifles and so on. What I heard more often than note was the operator saying, "Close! But no cigar!" Today carnival games are aimed mostly at kids but starting in the 20's and for decades following, they were aimed at a male audience. The most popular prize was usually a cigar. The games were also subtly rigged so that you usually lost, and you'd hear, "Close! But no cigar!" Nicodemus knew about God. He had dedicated his life to honoring God through his study of and observance of God's laws. But now he was face-to-face with God incarnate, and he didn't recognize him. He was close, but no cigar. And so he asks, "How can someone be born when they are old?" I can understand his confusion. But I think what he's really asking is, can you show me who God is? What have I been missing all my life? **Lesson # 1:** There's a world of difference between knowing about God and knowing God. Nicodemus was a good man; religion filled his days, but not his heart." Something was missing and he knew it! Nicodemus saw something great in Jesus' teaching and in his life, and he wanted to run toward that greatness, but he didn't know what it was. He didn't understand that through Jesus, he could know God and have a relationship with God. He was about to learn of

a God who chose to make Himself known, a God whose love for us compelled Him to enter into our human experience and take on our weakness and relate to us face-to-face. **Lesson # 2:** And that brings us to the second insight of this passage: once we've heard Jesus' words, we have to make a decision. No one can remain neutral. Even walking away, as Nicodemus did, is a decision.

Dr. Francis Collins is the former director of the National Human Genome Research Institute. His group decoded the 3 billion DNA letters that make up the human genome. Collins grew up as an atheist and was comfortable in this belief. But before he was the director of a prestigious scientific institute, he was a medical doctor. In that role, his witnessing how his patients' faith in God gave them great comfort in the face of suffering and death caused him to question his beliefs. In study and discussion, he found logical, reasoned evidence for the existence of God. As he said in an interview with PBS, "I didn't want this conclusion. I was very happy with the idea that God didn't exist and had no interest in me. And yet at the same time, I could not turn away. . . You can argue yourself, on the basis of pure intellect, right up to the precipice of belief, but then you have to decide. I don't believe intellectual argument alone will push someone across that gap . . . This is supernatural truth. And in that regard, the spirit enters into this, not just the mind."

The final insight from this week's scripture is this: we can't have the life God gives us until we die to our current life. That's one of the hardest things any follower of Jesus will face. Nicodemus, like many of us, wasn't ready for this truth. He walked away that day with no indication that he believed Jesus' words. He missed the greatest opportunity in the world, to know God and to live a new life empowered by the Spirit of God. In verse 5, Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit." Water refers to the act of baptism, which symbolizes dying to our old lives and being raised again to new life. And not just a second chance at the same life. To be born again means to live our new life with God's Spirit aligning our mind and heart with the mind and heart of God. It's a life that has been transformed.

So many of us go through life knowing about God but not knowing God. We spend our lives trying to be good enough to earn God's love. We study the Bible; we do good works in our community. And those are all good and God-honoring things. But we will never work our way to knowing God or earning salvation. God already did the work on our behalf. As John writes in vs. 16-17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." We only have to make the decision. Do we believe this? If so, can we give up our own life and exchange it for the transformed life God offers us? That is my hope and prayer for you this Lenten season. God is offering you a new life. Will you accept it?

For the Week Ahead

Have you tried to earn salvation? What did you do or stop doing? Did those changes make you feel "saved" (regardless of how good they may have made you feel)? Did you feel closer to God as a result?

What does it mean to be saved by grace? How do you experience it? Is it something you can do by yourself or does it come from above?

What does it mean "to be born again"? Do you believe you have been "born again"? Why, or why not?

Pray without ceasing!