

*Thy Will be Done...in redemption*

Shepherd's Grace Church

March 16, 2014

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.<sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.<sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.<sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'<sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"<sup>11</sup> "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony."<sup>12</sup> "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"<sup>13</sup> "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."<sup>14</sup> "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,<sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."<sup>16</sup> "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."<sup>17</sup> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3: 1-17) (Also read Gen. 12: 1-4)

This is spring break week for most schools around our area! I know a couple of families in our congregation have already left for spring break trips. Several more will be taking trips or doing special things this week as the kids are out of school and the winter appears to be nearly over! Our family too will venture out this week. Immediately following church, we will leave for Branson, MO and there we will pick up a wayward son!

I have not looked at a GPS system for directions to Branson. We have been there a number of times and I know the way well. We are not planning any stops along the way that we have not made any number of times so as we leave this afternoon, we leave with confidence! Monday, however is a different story. The second part of our journey will take us from Branson to the Dallas area where we will spend a few days with my daughters.

I have been from Ark City to Branson before, and I have been from Ark City to Dallas before, and I know that I can get to either one of those places without directions but I have never been from Ark City to Branson to Dallas. Without assistance, I might be able to find the general vicinity of the metro-plex but I likely will take a couple of wrong turns.

Now, I might be ok with the wrong turns and with “Taking the scenic route” as they say but I can promise you my passengers will not be ok with that. Three teenage boys, and not just small teenage boys in the back seat will be squirming and struggling and saying, “how much farther” before we even get out of the Branson city limits. They will not tolerate any wrong turns or missed directions and even if everything goes perfectly and we make no mistakes about our route they will still complain about how crowded they are and about why we are only listening to the basketball games and sports talk stations on the radio and about how we are bordering on abuse by cramping them in the small space of the back seat of our Ford Fusion!

Considering the plight before me, I turn to God’s command to Abram this morning. God says go and I imagine Abram’s family expressing some of the same concerns mine will express in a few hours. “Where are we going,” they will ask? “When will we get there,” they will want to know? “What are we going to have for lunch? Why do we have to sit so close together? Why does his music have to be so loud? Can’t we listen to something other than harps and lyres” Those are just a few of the questions on the lighter side of God’s call this morning! Those questions however, frame the nature of God’s relationship with God’s chosen people!

God calls! God calls everyone! Let me repeat that because some think God only calls certain people...pastors, pastor’s spouses (and these people have a very special call) people who can speak well, dress well, act right, are sin free but God calls everyone! The response from Abram today is the response God expects from everybody. Abram is 78 years old when God calls. God still calls and there is often a big point of emphasis on how God can use us no matter how old we are but there is another point to be understood today...Abram said yes!

Abram was 78 years old and he had no children and he had heavy family responsibilities and he had a wife who was looked down upon because she was thought to be barren but Abram said yes! He did not care that he was old or that he had the right qualifications. He cared that God called and he said yes! He did not care that he thought he might not have the appropriate qualifications for what God was asking him to do. He did not care that he was going to have to make adjustments to his lifestyle! He cared that God called and he said yes.

So often we think we know more about what we can do and what is possible in our lives than God does. We resist the call not because we do not recognize the call but because we fail to believe God can use even us. We are the wrong skin color, the wrong gender, the wrong economic status, the wrong political affiliation. We resist because of what we know and we miss an opportunity to serve God and be blessed beyond anything we might imagine! The point of God’s message to us today is that Abram said yes! The point of God’s message today is to know if we are willing to be as Abram.

We are now a way down the road to Jerusalem. We are a way down the road to the cross. If we have given up something for Lent, we have no doubt been tempted by our human desire. If we have taken on something for Lent, we have no doubt felt the increased weight of the burden. As we continue our journey, our sacrifice will seem more difficult, our burden even more heavy but we are invited to remember that God has called. God has use for us, for each of us and life, our life and the lives of others

depend upon us and our willingness to persevere in our journey. God expects the same response from each of us that God received from Abram...and that is exactly where Genesis meets John this morning! They meet in the unknown, the uncertainty of what lies ahead in the journey. They meet in the same kinds of concern we face in our journey to Jerusalem. They meet in the same fashion as our spring break trip this week, with many questions and concerns from those who wonder just how they are going to get to where they are going. They meet in discomfort and lack of direction. They meet seeking, hoping for and in some ways demanding clarification!

Now I'm guessing that many of you are shaking your head as you hear this seemingly abrupt transition. What is he talking about you are thinking? How does the call story of Abram and the coming of Nicodemus to Jesus connect with our journey to Jerusalem? How could it possibly connect with some obscure spring break trip? The answer lies in what I told you earlier. God calls everyone! Just as God called Abram, a leader of his tribe, a wealthy man, secure in his lifestyle and comfortable in his faith, so too, God calls Nicodemus!

Look at the first verse of our passage for today. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Now, it has long been speculated that the reason Nicodemus came at night was so he would not be recognized. He was a leader of the Jews, a Pharisee who could not risk being seen talking to this rebellious and rambunctious rabel rouser from Nazareth, a place where nothing good comes from! (John 1: 30ff) But think about it...Nicodemus was recognized. He was identified. Even from the beginning of his journey toward Jesus, Nicodemus was known!

Perhaps there was some other reason for his coming at night. Perhaps, and I am more than just speculating here, but perhaps night was the only time Nicodemus felt confident he could make contact with Jesus. I am not just speculating here. I believe scripture gives us warrant to claim a different reading, a reading that offers a more complete understanding of what is going on between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus made no attempt to conceal his identity as he came to Jesus. The very first verse of chapter 3 tells us exactly who he is.

Perhaps Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night because of the large crowds during the day. It would have been nearly impossible to get a private audience with Jesus during a time of preaching to large numbers of people as the gospel suggests in chapter 2. Nicodemus, observing that there is something different about Jesus' teaching and preaching wants clarification and needs to have questions answered. Perhaps he is not coming to criticize but to clarify. Perhaps this Pharisee is different. Perhaps he is not coming to trick or to trap but rather to try to gain understanding for himself about what Jesus has really come to do. His actions later in the gospel indicate that perhaps his understanding of Jesus is changing as he makes the journey with him to the cross. Remember Nicodemus is the one who tries to dissuade the deliberations of the other Pharisees to kill Jesus and he is also the one who brings spices for Jesus' burial! It seems that Jesus ministry affects Nicodemus and it seems it affects him from the very first!

Nicodemus says, we know who you are. We know that you are sent from God. As I travel this week from Ark City, not many will know that I am from here. My car tag indicates I am from Kansas and for those who know a little about Kansas, the tag tells them it is registered in Butler County not Cowley. Unless

people talk to me and have reason to inquire as to where I am from they will likely not learn where I am from. They will not know that I serve a small church congregation or even that I am a pastor or a person following God...that is, unless my actions demonstrate the connection.

Nicodemus recognized the connection between this person, Jesus, and God because of the way Jesus was living His life! He was doing work faithful to God's purposes and was meeting with success because He was following the will of God! Nicodemus, a trained Pharisee, one who would know the scriptures and would recognize another who was trying to live faithfully according to them recognized Jesus as one who was from God! He recognized Jesus as one who was being faithful to His call! Jesus' faith raises a flag for Nicodemus. How can Jesus be sent from God? How can He be doing God's work when for the last 400 years, God has been silent in the nation of Israel?

When Nicodemus says, we know you are sent from God, it is an invitation for Jesus to answer his question. Are you sent from God? Are you here to call us to our destiny as God's chosen people? How in fact, can you be sent from God? These are the questions Jesus hears when Nicodemus says, "We know you are a teacher sent by God." Jesus answers the questions immediately. He responds as one who understands what Nicodemus really wants to know. Just as Abram has been called, so too, Nicodemus has been called and as much as he wants to respond to Jesus' ministry, he has questions!

Jesus does not condemn him for the questions...just as I will attempt not to condemn the boys for their questions as we travel today. The questions Nicodemus asks are similar to theirs. How much further, what can we expect to see? When do we eat? Jesus accepts the question under the statement made by Nicodemus in much the same way I will accept these questions. They do not challenge the trip. They do not question the wisdom of making the journey. They simply seek clarification.

Jesus does not attempt to put Nicodemus down for asking. Instead, he attempts to answer. When Nicodemus says, you are sent from God, Jesus responds saying, "No one can see the Kingdom of heaven without being born from above!" He says, "Nicodemus, you have recognized where I come from." You have understood that I come from Arkansas City even though you had to work hard to come to that conclusion. He is saying, Nicodemus, you have begun to realize that I am not from some place obvious. Now, are you willing to learn the truth about the questions you really are asking?

As you hear Nicodemus' response, try to hear it this morning not as a critical response as may have been taught to you previously. Instead, hear it as a response of longing and desire. Hear Nicodemus respond saying, "Can one really be born again?" Is it possible to wipe out all the struggle and heartache that have been part of my past and put on a new life where all is forgiven and forgotten? Can I really have that? Can that really be? Can it be that easy?

Instead of hearing in Nicodemus' tone a judgmental accusation, hear in it a person longing to undo or redo something they know has hurt or offended others. Hear in Jesus' words an offer that goes beyond simple instruction and gets to the heart of Nicodemus' question. Hear in Jesus' response an offer of compassion and concern. He says again, "No one can see the kingdom of heaven unless they are born of water and the spirit."

The sense of humor evidenced by Nicodemus earlier, "Can one re-enter a mother's womb and be born again," would be put aside now as he listens carefully to Jesus and tries to respond to God's call.

Nicodemus' sincerity is revealed in his silence. Jesus says, "What is born of flesh is flesh. What is born of spirit is spirit." In these words, Nicodemus knows the truth of his own call. It is a call to change, to put aside the trappings of the world and the privilege that comes from being a Pharisee or a pastor. It is a call to be a person.

Nicodemus' astonishment at the revelation is acknowledged by Jesus and dismissed. "The wind, the spirit blows where it chooses. Each person is touched by it and is invited to feel it. God calls everyone! We do not know where the call comes from. We do not see it but we do hear it and we have a choice to respond to it. If the wind is strong enough on that day, it can turn us around. It can change our direction! It can put us on a new course in life. "Will you hear the wind," is what Jesus wants to know?

Yesterday, temperatures where I live reached close to 70 degrees. This morning when I got up, they had dropped to around 19. The wind was howling from the north and I could hear it blowing against the trees and the north side of our house. The intensity of the sound was distracting at the time and somewhat disconcerting because I did not know where it came from. Yesterday was such a calm and peaceful day but the beginning of today was anything but calm and peaceful. I did not know where or how the wind blew, I only knew that it was blowing and it was annoying and I wanted it to quit!

I can only imagine that is some of what Nicodemus was feeling as he listened to Jesus. Nicodemus, like so many of us, wanted the call of God, the blowing of the spirit, the annoying reminder that his life was not what it might have been, was not what it could be to stop. He did not want to change his life. He was comfortable as a leader of the Jews. He was respected and regarded as a person of promise and he did not want his reputation to change! He, like Abram was afraid. He, like Abram had a choice to make!

Jesus continues his encouragement of Nicodemus saying, "Are you a teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?" Perhaps Jesus did not use the critical tone we might want to associate with this question. Perhaps in hearing the question a different way we can realize more of the purpose Jesus has in His mission. Perhaps we can recognize that Jesus did not come to judge but to encourage. Are you a teacher, are you someone who has spent their life helping others understand the law, are you one who is dedicated to knowing the power of God and if you are, then listen to what is blowing in the wind! What you are hearing there is the truth. It will free you from your life of hopelessness and despair and will invite you into a life of promise and personal salvation! You can't see the kingdom of heaven unless you are willing to put aside all your fears and sadness, all your years of pain and allow yourself to be forgiven.

Just as those in the wilderness were dying because of the poison of the bite of the snake and that same serpent had to be lifted up so too must life be lifted up for those who are dying to their own guilt and shame! Sometimes it is easy for us to assume others know that they have options. Those of us who live in a world where options are many have a difficult time believing there are no choices or that people believe there are no choices. Perhaps in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus today we can gain understanding of the perception of one who believed he had no choice.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews and for 400 years God had been silent in God's communication with God's chosen people. God had spoken through the prophets and then had spoken nothing. God had not spoken through the Persian invasion. God had not spoken through the Greek invasion, and God had not spoken through the insufferable invasion by the Romans. The Pharisees were the protectors of the Law, the law given by God to God's chosen people and it was their responsibility to make sure that the law was carried out. They interpreted it, modified it and made it work for them.

For Jesus, that was the problem. The Pharisees made the law work for them and they protected it so they could protect the status quo and maintain their power. The modifications they made were not from God and the results of the modification left people feeling cut off from God and any possibility of God being present in their lives. Nicodemus knew nothing but what was taught him as a keeper of the law and as a result, he interpreted by that. His interpretation did not allow for alternatives or options. There could only be one choice and that was the Law!

To disobey the law was death! Just as people died in the wilderness from the bite of snakes, so too, people died in Israel from the poison of religious persecution! They were being kept from relationship with God because they could not see relationship as a possibility. They were being kept from reconciliation because they did not know God loves them! The Pharisees had factored out relationship and reconciliation as they made adjustments to the law which made enforcement and punishment the methods of right behavior.

Jesus says, "the wind blows where it chooses! You do not see where it comes from or where it goes but you cannot deny it!" Just as one could not deny the presence of the snake in the wilderness after one saw it, one cannot deny the power of the Spirit which does not take life but gives it! As Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, he reminds him of the cure for snake bite. It was not human involvement or antidote but God's involvement which was seen and believed. It was divine intervention that saved the people and not anything the people themselves did.

Just so, salvation from sin comes not from our action or ability but from the willingness of God to be seen and believed. Just as the snake was lifted up in the wilderness, so too the "son of man" must be lifted up! The Son must be seen so that God's offer of grace might be received. Nicodemus has never considered this choice because he has long ago put aside the notion that God is active in the world.

So many of us also put aside this notion. We believe that God has put us here and that we have to make the most of the resources we have. As a result, all we can see is what we possess. We never look beyond the boundary of our own lives and our own resources to recognize that God works outside the box. We assume God wants to judge us based on our ability to produce with what we have been given and we never recognize that God wants to produce for us through what we are willing to receive! God's grace abounds and God desires to pour out that grace if we are but willing to see it for what it is!

The Son must be lifted up so that we can see the totality of God's grace. As He is lifted we see our humanity. We look on our sin just as the Hebrews looked on their nemesis in the wilderness. They were dying because they were being poisoned! When that which was poisoning them was lifted up they were able to receive God's promise of healing because they saw death for what it was! Just so, as the Son is

lifted, we see our life for what it really is; filled with sin and sadness. As we look on it we recognize that God wants so much more for us. The Son must be lifted up so we can look beyond the sin and see salvation. Jesus takes on all our sin so we can take on life again!

Nicodemus was given a preview of this as Jesus explained the convergence of earthly and heavenly things to him! The world sees the threat and reacts with fear and trembling. God sees the threat and invites us to trust Him. Jesus knew the threat to humanity and instead of responding with fear to the world's sin, He responds with a forthright solution. He takes on our sin so we can once again be in relationship with God.

The Son did not come into the world so the world could be condemned through Him. Jesus did come to judge the world but His judgment was already made before He came. His judgment was grace; grace for all. He knew that even the smallest of sins would prevent a relationship with God. Therefore He announced that all sin is equal and as Paul tells us in Romans, the wages of sin; any sin, is death! Jesus took on that death and overcame it not to condemn the world to death but to judge it and restore it to life!

He said, "Thy will be done!" He meant God's will and God's purpose was to overcome all human frailty and as we remember the cross, we can see God's accomplishment of God's will hanging there for us to see! God's will is done...God's judgment is complete as Jesus comes into the world out of God's love not to condemn us but to restore us to life, life in abundance, and life in relationship with God for all eternity! Amen!