

Gen 12:1-4; Ps 121; Ro 4:1-5, 13-17; Jn 3:1-17

03-12-17 – 2nd Sun in Lent

By Grace, through Faith – Then, Now & Forever

Years ago, McSweeney went into the confessional box after years of being away from the Church. There's a fully equipped bar with Guinness on tap. On the other wall is a dazzling array of the finest cigars and chocolates.

Then the priest comes in. "Father, forgive me, for it's been a very long time since I've been to confession," says McSweeney. "But I must first admit that the confessional box is much more inviting than it used to be."

"Get out," says the priest. "You're on my side."
(from Rumors, by Ralph Milton)

My old friend Nicodemus reminds us that nobody is a lost cause. He *is* clueless, maybe a little ashamed (moving around in the dark) and needing to understand who Jesus is – Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus at night. Doesn't want to be seen. With all his learning and political power, this religious leader still needs help. He keeps thinking in material, literal terms, while Jesus is sharing spiritual truth. The Lord tells Nicodemus,

“Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (v 6)

Out of this midnight conversation we get the most famous saying in the entire New Testament – maybe in the whole Bible. More about that in a moment.

First, there aren’t many places in the Gospel where Jesus speaks to an individual person standing before Him. Mostly, He speaks to groups – large and small. He did speak to the Samaritan woman by the well of Sychar. He did speak one-on-one with Pilate. But during His time on earth, Jesus was a preacher, as I read it – not an individual spiritual director. So, the word we have this morning – to the Pharisee – is a rare and precious individual word.

We don’t get to hear Nick’s answer back to the Lord Jesus. The interview ends with an insight into the character and the will of God. We must presume Nicodemus just makes his way back home under cover of darkness. He has a lot to think about. He has learned things he never even thought about in Pharisee school.

We catch glimpses of Nicodemus later in John's Gospel. In the Sanhedrin controversy, because Jesus was seen at the fall festival of booths, the temple guards reported to the leaders. Jesus had been staying out of town because going to Jerusalem was dangerous. The leaders of the temple were looking for an excuse to nab Him. In that dust-up of the temple police telling of Jesus' presence, Nicodemus spoke in Jesus' favor. He told the council, "Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?" (Jn 7:51) The dear man still believes in justice – and more importantly, speaks up for justice when it is unpopular to do so.

We learn in Genesis that Abraham (1800 BCE) had been walking with God for some time when the Lord came to him in a vision. Abraham reminds God that there has been no child born. So, how can a man become a great nation if he has no heir? God takes Abraham outside and tells him to look up at the stars – and to count them if he is able. God says, "So shall your descendants be." That night, "...he believed in the Lord, and He (that is God) accounted it to him

as righteousness.” (Gen 15:6) With the change in Abraham’s trust and belief – God pours out grace upon him. His faith is accounted as rightness – or righteousness. This is not something we can do for ourselves. We don’t reach out and take hold of grace. Rather, God showers grace upon us. Nor can the Law make us righteous. Nicodemus understood his relationship to Abraham as coming through Moses – the law-giver. It seems he had never made the connection that Abraham was transformed by God on account of his faith.

Nicodemus, the religious leader, considered himself a true son of Abraham. Jesus of Nazareth is also a son of Abraham. Both Nicodemus and Jesus were familiar with the Genesis passage we heard this morning. Nicodemus was an expert in the covenants, especially this one God made with Abraham. Now, Jesus had lived that chapter of history first hand. He was there at the creation, and was certainly there when visitors came to Abraham announcing the birth of Isaac, Abraham’s son. Some even believe Jesus was among this group of three men (or angels) who came to Abraham under the oak trees at Mamre. (Gen 18) But Nick has only ever seen the

genealogical relationship to Abraham that comes from his identity as an Israelite. He would call him Father Abraham – perhaps never even thinking of him as the father of our faith.

After Jesus explained that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not die, but have everlasting life,” Nick’s heart was full. But, Jesus doesn’t stop there. He goes on to divide what has been accomplished by God’s gracious will entirely from the work of the Law. Jesus tells Nicodemus, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” (v 17) Nicodemus’ whole ministry and calling has to do with the Law. The Sanhedrin spent little time on mercy and grace. They were in the judging and condemning business. Jesus is saying that salvation is by grace through faith. Always has been – always will be.

In a time of turmoil, confusion and grief, when Jesus had been removed from the cross of crucifixion by His disciples and friends, Joseph of

Arimathea and Nicodemus offered comfort and help to Jesus' family.

John tells us, "Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*." (Jn 19:31) He had overcome his fear of unpopularity and the contempt of his learned colleagues. He came with burial spices because he understood he was saved by grace through faith in Jesus. He did not yet understand the greatest miracle was yet to be seen! Amen.