

The Second Sunday in Lent – 2020

Genesis 12:1-9

Romans 4:1-8, 13-17

John 3:1-17

Could God train a dog? I'm in the process of training a dog. Some success. Some failure. We named him "Ace." It's a pejorative; it's a sarcastic compliment for someone who is a bit dim to be called "Ace." Truth be told, I'm rather fond of Ace. I've taught him to sit, to lie down, to roll over, and to shake. The oldest boy taught him to spin. The dog is full of tricks and if he thinks that he is going to get a treat for performing then he'll just run through his complete repertoire, one trick after another, without being told to do a single thing. The failure? Ace chewed up his fourth pillow last week. Nicodemus doesn't believe that God could train an old dog. Perhaps Nicodemus is the progenitor of the cliché that you know so well. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." I don't believe it.

Nicodemus is a fellow who strikes me as one who is set in his ways, stuck in his ways. He even believes it about himself. But he comes searching out this young Rabbi. Jesus is certainly a controversial figure and Nicodemus has standing in the community as a Pharisee and doesn't want to see that standing suffer. Still, Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus, wants to probe His mind, perhaps – certainly wants to have a theological conversation. But he's an old dog – Nicodemus. He's been doing things a certain way for most of his life. New theological tricks isn't his wheelhouse. But he is definitely drawn to Jesus, drawn to His teaching, drawn to how this Rabbi handles the Word.

So Nicodemus pays a little visit to this impressive Teacher, but he comes at night. No street lights; just shadows and a bit of professional anonymity. And Nicodemus is complimentary. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). Now you tell me, is there a difference between identifying Jesus as a "teacher come from God" or Jesus as God incarnate? Flattery doesn't affect the Lord Christ the way it affects the proud. Plenty of people blew smoke Jesus' way – He's not interested. Jesus is interested in new tricks. You have to be born again/born from above.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Have you ever had a realization that came in a flash? A deep and powerful realization that you grasped with extraordinary clarity, surmising all the implications of this one idea in a single instant? That was Nicodemus here. He knew precisely what Jesus was saying and Nicodemus knew precisely what it would mean for him. And all he can think is that he's an old dog. Can he really change? Nicodemus doesn't think that it's likely. So he pulls out humor to verbalize his incredulity. "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4). I'm an old dog, bro. What you propose is far beyond my abilities. I'm tied to my past, tied to my Pharisaical sect, tied to my old ideas, my old convictions, my old community and my very personal oldness.

Tell me, how many different types of people have been converted to Christianity? How many different life situations? How many different ages, how many different races, how many

different social statuses, how many different types of religious people have come to know the Lord Christ and the eternal truth? How many different types of people have been baptized? How many cultures and how many continents? How many old dogs have come into Christ's church? He loves them and He draws them to Himself. New birth; new creation – born again, born from above. It is God's work. He brings it about. What God demands, God provides. We, the saints of Christ the King, we are born again. "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13)

It is grace. It is the gift of God. Nicodemus heard Jesus speak the most marvelous grace. The wonder of divine love spilled out of the Lord's mouth that presaged His holy death upon the holy cross. The Son of Man would be lifted up because God loves the world. The Son was sent not to condemn sinners but to save sinners. Rebirth must happen and God Himself would see to it. New conception, new creation, born from above, born of divine love. You and I and Nicodemus and all sorts of old dogs. Born again – born of blood, blood colored black with death. Born of blood, colored gold with resurrection. Born of blood, colored blue with baptismal water – that's what it means to be born of God.

God's Spirit attends God's Word. Where the Word of the Gospel goes, there the Spirit is at work to create faith, to open the eyes of the blind and draw people to the living water of Christ crucified and risen. It is amazing and it is wonderful and it is happening today. The Love of God is being proclaimed in every land on our planet. The church has a missionary zeal that has committed vast resources to spreading the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. People more entrenched in their ways than Nicodemus have joyfully been born again, born of water and the Spirit, born of Christ's glorious blood and the Father's glorious love. Being brought out of darkness into God marvelous light changes people. It changes their hearts, their disposition, their priorities, their character – yours included.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because the Lord was persona non grata among Nicodemus' peers, his fellow Pharisees. It was a bit cowardly. That is not how the story of Nicodemus ends. On the darkest of days, when others' courage failed, when friends to our Lord were few, Nicodemus remained steadfast. Who knows what Nicodemus suffered for it, who knows how he was made to pay later for a gesture of supreme devotion, but Nicodemus stood by the Lord on Good Friday. He and Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross. Nicodemus had brought seventy-five pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes, a royal amount, to prepare Jesus' body for burial. At one point, a man is ashamed to be seen visiting Christ. At another point, the same man is prepared to suffer all manner of scorn as he takes the supposed criminal, a theological pariah, down from the cross and lay Him in a garden tomb.

How has Christ changed you? What do you aspire to be? Has His love transformed you from a petty and selfish brute into a gracious and courageous disciple? I aspire to be that. The old dog of my sinful nature is to be crucified with Christ. He teaches me the new trick of love for God above all things and loving my neighbor as myself. Grace is alive in us, the children of God who have been born from above. He trains us. With loving discipline, with mercy and forgiveness, with a vibrant Word that does not return to Him empty. He trains young and old. He reveals His kingdom and His purposes and He draws us into His life. What you could never be on your own,

He creates within you. You have been born from above. You stand with all those who have been washed in Christ's blood. Courage, internal fortitude, humility, mercy, and a constant pursuit of virtue; those are just some of the new tricks. "God is at work in you to will and act according to His good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). Humanly speaking, we may not all be old dogs but we are all constantly learning new tricks.