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*Second Sunday in Lent  
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*John 3:1-17*

*How can these things be?*

Intro: Our New Testament lesson comes from John. The Pharisee Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night with questions, but he is unable to understand that entrance into God's kingdom is a matter of being born of the Spirit. Let us listen for God's word to us.

The story of Nicodemus is one that is challenging and confusing, for Nicodemus is a mysterious character. While it is not so easy to do, we gain more from this text if we understand and acknowledge that Nicodemus was a lot like us. He is one of us. If he had modern clothing on Nicodemus could slip in the back door and into a pew and we would not be able to tell that he was not one of us. Nicodemus was educated. He was a part of the governing council of his community. He was a person of some affluence, as we are living in North America. And above all - he was curious.

Like Nicodemus, we too, are people who are curious about Jesus. We would not have come to church today if we did not

have a certain pull, a certain curiosity, a certain desire to know and understand Jesus Christ. Nicodemus came to visit Jesus in the night, and that probably was much more than a matter of the time of day. Nicodemus came to visit Jesus while Nicodemus was in the dark. He did not understand, but he was curious and interested. And he had some sense that this rabbi was someone of great importance, and he came to visit and to try to understand. In so doing, he is like us.

Nicodemus was also a person who was very confused by Jesus. He applied his intellect, his learning, and the values of his culture, and still he could not understand what in the world Jesus was talking about. Though we may not like

to admit it, the same can be true for us. When Nicodemus and Jesus talked, they talked past each other. As we listen to the dialogue, as we read it and reread it and try to understand it, the only thing that will be clear to us about it is that Jesus and Nicodemus never really connected, Nicodemus comes to Jesus in his curiosity and his interest, and he says, "You must be someone from God."

Nicodemus came to Jesus, wanting to know who Jesus really was and where his power came from. But look at how the conversation went, Jesus didn't cooperate the way his questioner wanted him to and he redirected the question to something other than what Nicodemus had in mind. Now, we should understand that Nicodemus approached Jesus with a certain amount of hope. Yet he was looking for a just certain kind of answer. He came looking for a piece of knowledge, expecting just enough to keep him going, and Jesus gave him more; he gave him the whole puzzle.

He knew that Jesus, this Rabbi, had been sent by God. That much was clear. No one could do what Jesus did unless God was very much behind it. Yet in his approaching Jesus, Nicodemus asked much more than he thought he did...Much more than he intended. He didn't frame it in these words, but this is what he ended up asking... "What is God doing by sending you here? How

does this change things, that you are here, and with us now. What is God saying through your being here?"

This was no idle curiosity. He wasn't splitting religious hairs with this question -- he wasn't asking Jesus the number of angels that could dance on the head of a pin. This was a Pharisee speaking -- a learned man, a priest, a person deeply concerned about his faith and the tradition in which he was raised, bringing himself to the one person who might be able to answer this basic question about God.

We don't know too much about Nicodemus, he came at night perhaps to avoid being detected by others, for he was risking his reputation and livelihood searching for this answer. Jesus' initial answer was direct, and it was just the beginning. He spoke to Nicodemus about God. It's as if he was enticing Nicodemus to ask for more. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew or from above". The flood gates of Nicodemus' curiosity were opened and he just had to follow this up.

If this Jesus was a teacher sent by God -- What in the world was he talking about? How can birth happen twice? Isn't once enough? Nicodemus wanted facts, he wanted to be able to get a good handle on this, and to be able to understand it completely.

Albert Einstein is reported to have said that the most beautiful thing a person can experience is the mysterious -- and that a person who can no longer stop to wonder, to stand in awe of the mystery of life -- is as good as dead. Nicodemus was challenged by Jesus in having his question transformed from a 'how-to' to a "why", and he had a very hard time with it. He was obviously frustrated with Jesus' answers, in words whose meaning he didn't understand; and in glimpses of God's Spirit he wasn't ready to look at.

Most of us, I'd guess, come at life the same way as Nicodemus. We're comfortable with a "how-to" mentality about life. As people of a technological age, we're not comfortable with mystery.

While I don't know how the zip drive on my computer works I'm sure somebody knows it down to the nth detail, and knows how to fix it when need be. Mystery is a foreign word to us. Practicality dominates our lives. We don't feel comfortable dealing with the "why" questions of life.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, full of anticipation. He was looking for a word of advice, some help... It was natural for him to go to a Rabbi to find some help. A Rabbi would tell you some stories, some parables and teachings, from the Talmud, stories which would direct you in ways in which

you should be able to begin to sort it out and decide in light of the law and tradition. But this time Jesus didn't teach like other Rabbis, he didn't teach like the Pharisees. He didn't give options. He said, instead, "You must be born anew." Jesus upset people with his way of teaching. He upset the wrong kind of people. Some people just walked away -- others took his words as a serious threat.

As for Nicodemus, he stayed and listened to Jesus. The author Fred Buechner envisions this encounter and has modernized it a little and he writes. "Jesus told Nicodemus that unless you got born again, you might as well give it up. That was all very well, Nicodemus said, but how were you to pull a thing like that off? How especially were you supposed to do it if you were pushing 65? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning?"

We can imagine that just then, in the midst of their talking, a gust of wind happened to whistle by, making the dying embers of the campfire burst into flame, and Jesus said that being born again was like that. It wasn't something you did. The wind did it. The Spirit did it. It was not something you do. It happens. "How can this be?" Nicodemus said; and that's when Jesus let him have it. Maybe Nicodemus had six honorary

doctorates and half a column in Who's Who, Jesus said, but if he couldn't grasp something like this, he'd better go back to kindergarten. "I'm telling you like it is," Jesus said, "I'm telling you what I've seen. I'm telling you that there are people on Medicare walking around with a glint in their eyes. I'm telling you that there are ex-cons teaching Sunday school. The Spirit is like that, unbelievable change happens, believe me.

Jesus began by talking about belief and quickly moved into talking about trust. Now there's belief and there's belief. There is intellectual consent and there is trust. Of all of Jesus' words to Nicodemus, the punch-line comes verse 16. It's a verse famous enough to be regarded as the most important single verse of the whole Bible. "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."

Jesus is there to save. Ready or not, Jesus is there. Ready or not. God is ready for us, to accept us and not to condemn us, no matter who we are. Here is how, says Jesus. "Put your trust in me. Watch me. Don't think about it too hard. Just do as I do. Trust me, and travel with me. I will be with you along the way. Amen.