

## **Spiritual Rebirth | Psalm 121; John 3:1-17 | LUMC | 3/5/2023**

Dear Church family and friends: last week we watched Jesus being tempted and defeating those temptations. Jesus taught us to win when tempted. We know from Jesus' temptations that without scriptural knowledge, one cannot expect to win.

Today we encounter Jesus executing the plan he strategized in the desert. He is not hungry, tired, or beaten by the heat of the desert. He is full of energy, preaching to win souls in his message of spiritual rebirth that has spread far and wide, attracting the humble, the lowly, the modest and the elite. Nicodemus, from the upper class, is curious about Jesus and his preaching. He will try to visit Jesus by night to question him and to learn the message of salvation.

Nicodemus is mentioned three times in the Bible. He was a member of the Sanhedrin and a dedicated Pharisee. The Sanhedrin is a team of judges in every Jewish city. They wield religious, economic, and political power.

This is the same Nicodemus at the trial of Jesus, watching injustice being played out by other members of the Sanhedrin. He reminds them all that according to Jewish law a victim is not guilty until proven guilty. Despite his pleading for Jesus to be accorded a hearing, the council overrules him and condemns Jesus to death without a hearing. We certainly know that mob psychology is often dangerous. Participants pay attention to their own interests instead of that of the victim.

This is the same Nicodemus who assisted Joseph of Arimathea to embalm the body of Jesus after a shameful death on the cross, a death that Romans cared not to investigate to bring the murderers to justice. Who cares about the death of a perceived radical, as Jesus was assumed to be? It is like today when very few, if any, care for the death of the homeless, religious fanatic, a minority, or foreigners among us.

Nicodemus is literally astounded by Jesus' teaching. He perceived Jesus asking listeners to retract back into the womb and be reborn to start a new life, a sinless life, a life Jesus might supervise. Nicodemus wonders how an adult can be born again. He says, it's impossible!! I concur with Nicodemus: a physical rebirth scientifically is inconceivable. Nicodemus wants Jesus to justify the allegation of a physical rebirth, lest his teaching be skewed, heresy and against natural justice.

Was Jesus speaking of a physical rebirth?

I do not think so. Nicodemus was perhaps a literal thinker not open to a new way of perceiving the world around him. Or perhaps he was one of those people who jump to conclusions without thoroughly engaging their brains. Maybe he was among the deep philosophers who cannot let a new idea sink in without a thorough debate. Either way, Nicodemus must learn this new teaching, never heard before.

Jesus' today is contrasting two concepts: physical birth and spiritual birth. He insists that believers must vacate their fleshly view of birth, and engage in a spiritual view of it. Everyone knows their birth history. I know my parents bore me and I owe them. They taught me traditions and customs of my lineage. They taught me human

values and the do's and the don'ts of the clan and the community. Yes, they taught me as they were also taught.

Jesus comes along to define my upbringing as the teachings of the flesh and that leads to death and concludes at the grave! Jesus is categorical that there is no afterlife for those in the flesh because “what is born of the flesh is flesh.” Jesus is without hesitation telling the Jews of those days, as well as the people of all other cultures, that physical life ends at death. This bold teaching corrects the Jews and most cultural beliefs and teachings about the afterlife.

Jesus introduces the next lesson regarding the reign of God, where those “born of water and spirit” enjoy eternity. I have often preached about our awareness of our inherent cultural teachings that can block us from transitioning into Christ's new instructions. Nicodemus' cultural upbringing is blocking him. At first, though curious he did not understand the new schooling. He is locked into Jewish beliefs, and he needs a “mental bomb” to unlock him to gain new insights and a new mindset regarding the reign of God, which starts at baptism and never ends when a believer trusts God to save and keep. The holy Spirit invites us to believe and joins us to the journey of faith.

It is not easy to move away from our old teachings. My grandmother, a diehard Christian, did not understand the concept of being born again. When I committed my life to Christ and became an honest follower of Christ, I sat down to explain my new understanding of faith—that of being a Christian inside and out! She appeared surprised. She said, “Missionaries taught our ancestors to get saved—*kuonoka kuuma mikwene ya aciari*. Is that what you mean? I asked her to explain what the *kimeru* (my mother tongue) statement means. She said, “My ancestors were careful not to let their offspring get saved because it meant children being taken away from their parents and placed in church boarding schools. In 1909 some of them were burned in a house while praying. Grace, sometimes children never came home, including *Kanocia*, daughter of my relative. Is that what you want to happen?!” I said, “I am staying home living a Christ-led life, being truthful and accountable to God for my faith, Grandma!” She begrudgingly accepted.

Most of us are aware “being born again” in the modern world is relegated to the Pentecostal churches or Christian sects. Most of the mainline church members think being a dignified member is sharing less and less of their faith, of being born again! I will not shy away, or deny, or talk less of being “born with water and spirit”. It is a condition for eternity.

This rebirth starts at baptism when the Holy Spirit indwells into the life of a new believer. When the spirit of God takes over, one becomes a new creation. The believer's body becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit, and does not live for the self alone, but also for others. We know those living in the spirit by their spiritual fruits like Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, a ranking Jew, gave up his political and cultural status to a lesser place so he could accept salvation. It appears that he was the first leading person to become a Christian during the first year of Jesus' ministry. Following his salvation,

Nicodemus became the defender of justice and Christian values we all are called to stand up for. He became a great supporter of the minority—Jesus' followers. Nicodemus never sought Jesus by night again: he became a daylight witness of his faith. He openly assisted in preparing Jesus' body that they lowered before 6 pm to allow those going for Sabbath worship to start their prayers. Nicodemus offered his energy, resources, wisdom, and political powers for the ministry even though he was overruled.

Nicodemus become our example for practicing our faith and standing for justice and fighting injustice, standing with the minority in their struggles to share in the national justice. We offer others hope in this hopeless world. Nicodemus remind us the enemy of Christian faith is fear, fear to do what is right. When you are on the right path, be brave, do what is right. The hypocrites take advantage of Christian's fears and overrun them. I believe I have honestly stood for my faith and done what is right in the eyes of God. Always present bare facts like Nicodemus and allow honesty and truthful living stand the test.

Have you found yourself being ignored and doubted? Take heart! Nicodemus stood for his faith. Have you been misunderstood in your life journey? Have you stood for justice and testified to what Christ means to you in your family, career, and your life? Jesus' words of wisdom can guide you during trying times. Listen to Jesus' very words, "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." Then Jesus ends his narrative with these calming and assuring words, "Whoever believes in me will have eternal life. I came into the world to save sinners." But only those who believe!

The psalmist also offers encouragement by asking us to trust in God every hour. God will always save us from every evil. Let us believe that our help comes from God through our savior, Jesus Christ. I encourage everyone to stand firm against all types of sins during this Lenten season. Amen.