

Today's scripture contains the most often quoted Bible verse in American culture (3:16). The story of the late night visit of Nicodemus is unique to John who tells this story with majestic poetry, a easy-to-miss double entendre, and much dualism. Notice the wordplay and dualism throughout: the images of light and darkness; earthly things and heavenly things; the true and the false; salvation and condemnation; and the flesh compared with the spirit.

Pharisee: they were one of the groups of the Jewish leaders. They were closest to the people, in a sense populist, consecrating their lives to a radical obedience of the Torah laws of purity, sabbath and faithfulness.

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews: He is mentioned only in John here, also in 7:50, and in burying the body of Jesus in 19:39. He is considered a representative of the group of tentative believers in Jesus in 12:42 ⁴² Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God." Who feared to publicly reveal themselves as Jesus followers. Leader means "ruler", indicating that he is a member of the Sanhedrin: the highest governing body of Israel, a 70 member body of elite Pharisees, Scribes, Saducees and lay people.

by night: John often uses the metaphor of night and day or darkness and light throughout the gospel to set the stage. Darkness symbolizes evil, untruth, ignorance, or confusion. While light represents the opposite. See for example: "Jesus said, ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work." John 9:4; or "Jesus said, ¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." John 11:10 And also " So, after receiving the piece of bread [as a sign of having betrayed Jesus], Judas immediately went out. And it was night." John 13:30. Curiously Nicodemus comes at night (maybe to hide his visit from other eyes?) but later leaves it to enter the light of following Jesus (19:38).

the kingdom of God: this is both a geographical place and temporal space, for it can also be translated as the "reign" or "power" of God. The synoptic gospels are littered with this term and idea, but John only uses it twice: here in verses 3 and 5.

Born from above: in the original Greek this expression has a double entendre. It can also mean "born again." Hence why Jesus says one thing, most likely "born from above or on high" and Nicodemus is confused hearing it as "born again." In English this textual complexity doesn't exist, making the story less rich.

SEE: Here the Greek word used means "to experience" or "to encounter" or "to participate in." It's also used to "see death" in Jon 8:51 and see life in John 3:36.

SCRIPTURES FOR SUNDAY 1.28.2018

John 3:1-21
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ Now there was a **Pharisee** named **Nicodemus**, a **leader of the Jews**. ² 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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can **SEE** the kingdom of God without being **born from above**." ⁴ 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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and *Spirit*. ⁶ What is born of the *flesh* is *flesh*, and what is born of the *Spirit* is *spirit*. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be **born from above**.' ⁸ 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*." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet **you** do not understand these things?"

¹¹ "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. ¹² If I have told **you** about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who

Spirit / wind: another textual complexity that exists in the original Greek but not in English. In Greek the word is *pneuma* which can mean: spirit, wind, and breath. Think of Genesis 1 where the spirit of God hovers over the waters and the breath of God brings the man made of dirt to life. Thus the sound of the wind blowing is equivalent to the voice of the Spirit speaking

you: in these two instances the you is plural – referring to all of the people, or Jewish leaders...

MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS: This points back to the story told in Numbers 21:4-9:

<<⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” ⁶ Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ **And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.”** ⁹ **So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.**>>

It’s also echoed in Wisdom 16:5-7:

“⁵For when the terrible rage of wild animals came upon your people and they were being destroyed by the bites of writhing serpents, your wrath did not continue to the end; ⁶ they were troubled for a little while as a warning, and received a symbol of deliverance to remind them of your law’s command. ⁷ For the one who turned toward it was saved, not by the thing that was beheld, but by you, the Savior of all.”

Later we see Jesus lifted up as a source of salvation (like the serpent by Moses) in John 12:32: “³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” . We also hear that those who see Jesus see the Father, as those that looked upon the snake in the story saw God – John 14:9: “⁸ Philip said to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”

eternal life: This is the first time that this expression is used in the Gospel of John. In John – and here in particular – eternal life is the life of the children of God, of all those begotten (or born) from on high or again; those who are born of the Spirit. See John 1:12-13. The idea of 15 & 16 is most similar to that expressed in Matthew 18:3 “Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (and also Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17). Being a child means to live with a orientation of dependence upon God (as a child is with their parents).

descended from heaven, **the Son of Man**.¹⁴ And just as MOSES LIFTED UP THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS, so must **the Son of Man** be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “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.

¹⁷ “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. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- What shimmers for you in this story and sermonette?
- What word, phrase or image touches your life today?
- What does being born again or “from above” mean for you?
- In Greek the word “to save” or “salvation” (*sozo*) means: to save, to deliver or protect to heal, preserve, to make whole. How has knowing, seeing, following Jesus saved you? How do you need or want Jesus to save you today?

You may want to refer to John 1 which presents the notion of eternal life as a being born from on high/in the spirit.

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² *But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,* ¹³ *who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.