

There is a trend among preachers...
to find that elusive “fresh perspective” or “new insight” into the readings.

The more familiar the text, the harder we try to find something new.

And today we have the bible’s most well-known verse
John chapter three, verse sixteen:

***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.***

Martin Luther called John 3:16 “*the Gospel in a nutshell.*”

Good luck trying to add fresh perspective or new insight to that!
But maybe that’s not the point.

For as pervasive as John 3:16 is in our culture
on billboards, bumper stickers, hats, pillows, tattoos and jewelry
Maybe the task is not finding a fresh perspective or insight...
maybe the task is simply to return our focus to the word themselves.

Sure John 3:16 is well-known and quoted often...
but how many of us can quote John 3:17?
Who here today knows the Nicodemus’ story by heart?

While John 3:16 has rightly earned its place among
the most memorable and hopeful verses in the New Testament
The bigger deal here...
is its witness to the love of the God we meet in Jesus.
Nicodemus was a leader among the Jews.
In public, Nicodemus was devoted to the Jewish establishment.
But in private, Nicodemus had his doubts.

And so, he visited Jesus under the cover of nightfall.

Nicodemus says to Jesus

***We know that you are a teacher who has come from God.
No one can do what you do without the presence of God.***

Nicodemus saw Jesus as a good teacher
and a knowledgeable interpreter of Torah...

but Jesus was also filled with God's life-giving Spirit.

Nicodemus wanted that too.

Then, as Jesus so often does,
he says something that utterly astounds everyone:

***Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God
without being born from above.***

You can't find the Kingdom of God by praying a certain way
or believing a certain way
or following a certain set of rules or customs

It's about a complete rebirth of our entire existence!

Nicodemus then asked an honest question
that seems almost laughable to us today

***"How can anyone be born after having grown old?
Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"***

For as off-the-mark as the question might seem,
It may actually point us to the way God works?

Consider Abraham and Sarah.

God promised them a son.

Upon hearing the absurd promise of a child, the elderly Sarah laughs!
Even the name of the promised child... Isaac... means ***he laughs***.

And what about Moses?

God spoke to him through a burning bush.

Telling him to lead the Israelites out of slavery.

Moses' response?

Who, me? You must have the wrong guy!

I don't even know your name!

Most astonishing of all... is when God converted the Apostle Paul.

In the Book of Acts...

Paul attacked Jesus' disciples... rallying to destroy the new church...

And God blinded him with bright light and called him to apostleship.

The same dynamic is at play here with Jesus and Nicodemus.

God... working around the edges,

making the impossible... possible...

Nicodemus came to Jesus ***under the cover of nightfall...***

That's gospel code for uncertainty and apprehension.

He's well aware of Jesus authority as capable, insightful teacher...

But there's something else... Nicodemus can't put his finger on it.

So... he takes a huge risk and speaks to the master... face-to-face:

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."

Jesus tells Nicodemus...

In order to see the kingdom of God...
we have to give our whole selves over
to an entirely different way of being.
We have to be “born from above.”

Jesus was inviting Nicodemus
into a deeper relationship with the Living God,
and Nicodemus’ response?

Yes! Sign me up! What do I do first?”

Nope.

He says...

***So let me get the mechanics of this straight.
I’m born from my mother,
and you’re saying I have to be born again.
That’s impossible!”***

Imagine the smiles in heaven
over Nicodemus’ narrow view of God’s divine nature...

Truth is... it still happens... Even with all we know about God...
Some people just don’t get it?

Jesus said...

Do unto others,

and we say...

Okay, as long as I know who they are and we along.

Jesus says,

Give your life to the work of the Kingdom

and we say

How about I toss a 10 spot into the collection plate

Jesus says...

***Love one another and forgive one another
as you are loved and forgiven.***

And we say

Define love.

Let us approve the ground rules for this whole forgiveness thing.

Sarah gave birth to a son... Isaac...

Moses accepted God's call... and led the people to the Promised Land.

Paul put away his old life and carried the gospel to the world.

Nicodemus?

After he left Jesus...

He returned to his position among the Jewish establishment.

His conversion didn't happen with a bolt or a flash

There's no big story passed down through the ages.

Nicodemus' rebirth happened over a long journey...

That began under the cover of darkness

when he took a chance on Jesus.

He was an uncertain, fly-by-night skeptic.

And with the exception of one brief mention

we never hear from Nicodemus again

until the end.

As Jesus hung on the cross... crucified

After all the other disciples fled for fear of persecution...

Nicodemus... was at the foot of the cross...

With myrrh and aloes and other provisions for a Jewish burial...

ready to bear the broken and lifeless body of Jesus... to his grave.

Nicodemus... was there... reborn...

Jesus said,
***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.”***

We may never know what Nicodemus was thinking
as he heard those words.

But something within him was changed.

And little by little,
his heart was cracked open and he was born anew...
he found his way through darkness and doubt
all the way to the cross.

Because he finally understood what Jesus meant by John 3:16

And...

What he meant by John 3:17...

***God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.***

Amen.