

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent

'Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.'

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We enter the season of Lent, with fasting, and almsgiving, and with prayer.

Some fast, though it is often treated these days as an antiquated practice. Some give alms, though often with suspicion as how they will be spent by the recipient. Prayer, beseeching God, alone remains as a refuge of certainty and of piety.

Many of us pray to God, and ask of Him answers to the bitter questions of our lives. We do not receive them. What we gain instead is what seems to be no answer at all, or worse, an absurd answer, a response that seems to have nothing to do with what we inquired about.

Shall we, then, be surprised? Many lose faith, for they say their prayers 'were not answered'. It is a hard truth for prideful humanity to suffer beneath, but nothing seems to please the Lord more than not to answer your question.

Behold, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus. This man came by night and said to Jesus, '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.' Jesus answered him 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

What has Christ's response to do with the question? Did Nicodemus ask anything about being born again or seeing God's eternal empire?' In fact, he asked nothing at all, he merely observed that Jesus was a man of God, yet, in a sort of non-sequitur, the Lord gives an answer to a question not asked. *'Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'*

In confusion, a confusion we would all share, Nicodemus asks, *'How can a man be*

born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?'

Again, the Lord does not give a clear response: *'Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.'*

Nicodemus asks a simple question, how can one be born again? Christ responds with a confounding answer, that one must be born of *water and the spirit*.

What exactly does that mean? To be born of *water and the spirit*? The Lord has no desire to clarify. Rather, He hides obscurity with obscurity. Nicodemus comes *by night*, and so in the darkness of night shall his questions be answered, shade for shade, shadow for shadow.

'Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

Cast off your pretense of piety, and ask the obvious question: what in the name of all the saints and martyrs does the blowing of the wind and the sound it makes have to do with being born again? And what does that have to do with water and the spirit? And what does that have to do with being born again? And what does that have to do with what was not even a question to begin with, but a statement, that Jesus was a man of God?

The atheist pronounces with snark that all this Christianity business is foolishness. The Christian, if he is to be honest, replies, *'You don't know the least of it.'*

But such is pleasing to the Lord, for it is written *'If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.'* *'For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.'* *'Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?'* Therefore, *'it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.'* *'For the foolishness of God is wiser than men.'*

Lent prepares us for the foolishness of God, which shall annihilate the wisdom of men, even as *by the breath of God, all that lives shall perish*.

The children of Israel wandered forty years in search of a land flowing with milk

and honey. Noah rode the flood for forty days and forty nights in search of a mount full with trees and oil. Now we who wander for forty days seeking a land that flows with blood and water, and a mount that bears a tree of life, and the oil of the Anointed One.

Nicodemus, in his confusion asks *'How can these things be?'* The Lord responds, *'Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'*

Herein lies the key, the key that shall open the lock of all this madness. *'The Son of Man must be lifted up.'*

In the crucifixion of the Lord, towards which we travel, to that Good Friday, lies the answer to every question. For there, a centurion shall declare the Son of Man to be the Son of God; and by His Passion and bloody sweat, shall pour forth flesh, and blood and water. And by this water shall those who seek the Lord *while it is night* be born again by baptism *when morning dawns*. By this flesh and blood shall we be brought forth of a new mother, the everlasting Church, of her virgin womb, in the Eucharist. And living within the eternal communion of the saints, we shall know His Spirit, as it moves, for we shall hear the Spirit's sound, which is the Word of God, even as it is written, *'My words are spirit.'*

The Lord has taken upon Himself every human sin, and has *become sin for us*. Now there is no murderer, no adulterer, no idolater, no thief; there is but one great killer, harlot, robber, the everlasting Savior, who has come *to make all things new*. *He shall be wounded for our transgressions. He shall be broken for our iniquities. By his stripes we shall be healed.*

Christ answers Nicodemus in a way that confuses him, even as it confuses us. But it is an answer. The right answer. Christ declares that nothing that He does shall be understood until the Son becomes a serpent, and until that serpent is *'lifted up'*, that in the madness of His murder upon the Holy Cross, the Church may be born of His blood, that fallen, hateful, blasphemous mankind might *have eternal life*. In this, this *foolishness of man*, this slaying of the beloved Son, shall become

the wisdom of God.

Only one question remains, perhaps the question Nicodemus should have asked:
'Why have you come?'

Christ gives the reason that His Father gave to Him before all time:

'For God so loved the world...'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Genesis 12:1-9; Romans 4:1-8, 13-17; John 3:1-17.