

"Asking for Directions"

Text: John 3:1-17

Grace and peace be yours in the name of our Savior God. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

The text that will form the basis for our study this morning is found in that well-known 3rd Chapter of John's Gospel:

ESV John 3:1-17 *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ 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. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And 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, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

So far the revealed, inerrant Word of our God. With complete confidence that these are in fact the verbally inspired words of our God, and according to our sincere desire that he would bless each of us through the study of these words, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

I would imagine that most of you recognized that I didn't follow the pattern I usually follow in introducing the sermon text. My own personal experience has

always been that I do better if I am in some way prepared to hear a sermon text when it is preceded by some sort of introduction. In other words, I listen better when I am prepared to listen, and I listen more thoughtfully when my thoughts are first focused or directed – which is the whole purpose of the introduction.

There is no hard and fast rule in this sort of thing. Some preachers read the text first, insisting that God must be allowed to speak before they add their own words. Since I found that that didn't work for me for the first 25 years of my life, I choose to introduce God's Word.

There is a reason I didn't do that this morning – and it has nothing to do with the fact that we were all robbed of an hour of sleep last night. I did it because I more or less want you to write the introduction. Bear with me.

I have no doubt that at least sections of our text for this morning, if not the entire text, are very familiar to all of you. This chapter of the Bible, after all, contains arguably the most well-known and oft-quoted passage in all of Scripture – John 3:16 – known affectionately as "the gospel in one sentence."

Knowing this section of God's Word as you do, how would you present it to someone else, if you were called upon to do so? Would you first introduce it and then explain it, or just read it? Now suppose that you were called upon to present this section of God's Word to a group of Christians who were well familiar with it. How would you do that? How would you present the truths conveyed in these words to those who had heard the words dozens, even hundreds of times before?

We are often reminded that we are never supposed to be spectators when it comes to God's Word. The sacred words of our Bibles were chosen, preserved, and delivered to us by God so that all who hear or read them are taught by them, comforted or converted by them, are inspired and grow through them – personally and individually. So how would you go about presenting these words to accomplish that?

To use a woodworking analogy, the key is not to sand the surface smooth but to dig into the rough spots. It is not to present the obvious truths as a polished but tedious repetition of what all Christians already know, but to struggle to better understand the obvious by understanding the whole. That means paying special attention to the "knotty" parts. Just like with a piece of wood, it is often the knotty parts of God's Word that can bring it to life and make it that much more interesting, applicable, and helpful.

How does that relate or apply to our text? Answer with a question. What part or parts don't you understand? What doesn't seem to follow or make

sense? Find that, and you've found your "entrance" into a deeper, fuller understanding of this part of God's Word.

For me it was fairly obvious. Jesus' reply to Nicodemus didn't seem to follow. It didn't seem to make sense, given how Nicodemus began the exchange. Nicodemus began with: **"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 replied with: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."**

Does that make sense to you? Does it seem to follow? Is that something you could envision yourself saying in reply to Nicodemus' opening statement? The great thing here – the key really – is to remember that Jesus is the absolute Master. He doesn't make mistakes and he doesn't do random. Start there. Jesus' wisdom and insight dramatically exceed our own. He therefore had a purpose, a reason, for replying as he did, and that reason was never to confuse or obfuscate. Jesus was no politician. He always had a point and a goal. We therefore begin to better understand this entire text when we better understand just what was going on here.

First we need to back up a bit, because we passed over an important clue earlier in our text. In verses 1 and 2 we read: **"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night..."** The **"by night"** part must have been important, or God the Holy Spirit would not have included it. Same with the fact that he was not only a Pharisee but a ruler. If not, the Holy Spirit would probably have just said, *"Now there was a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus and said..."* This tells us that what we have in Nicodemus is a powerful and influential man, a member of the Sanhedrin, but one who is profoundly conflicted, and afraid. He is evidently coming to Jesus by night because he doesn't want to be seen with Jesus – not yet willing to risk losing his position and power. But come he does. Because he is conflicted. Because he is confused.

This is the man who opened the conversation with: **"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."** And it is to this man that Jesus replied with: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."** Again, why? What's going on here?

Say what you will about the Pharisees, their life centered around their religion. There is no doubt that at least the majority held to an adamant and unquestioning acceptance of the existence of God. And not just any god, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their problem was not that they didn't know who the one true God was, their problem was that they rejected Jesus as his Son, as the promised Messiah. Nicodemus was obviously no exception. He believed in God, and as a Pharisee he also believed in a life after death. It

was only the Sadducees that denied the resurrection of the dead. Nicodemus was no Sadducee.

This is the confused, conflicted man that comes to Jesus by night and begins with what is essentially the only thing of which he is certain, the only thing of which he has become convinced: **"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."** There is no reason to believe that what Nicodemus said to Jesus was anything other than a statement of what he genuinely believed to be true. There's no reason to believe that he was posturing, for there were no other Pharisee members of the Sanhedrin around to posture for or to. Obviously he wasn't trying to trip Jesus up, for if that had been his motive he would have done it in front of "reliable" witnesses.

Jesus understood immediately. Here was a man who "believed in God," and who believed in the resurrection of the dead, but who was suddenly uncertain as to how to find his way to God in the afterlife. His title (a Pharisee member of the Sanhedrin) tells us that he had long been immersed in the work-righteous religion of the Pharisees. In other words, he had been taught from little on that the way to heaven had to be earned through the keeping of the Mosaic Law. There is no reason to doubt that he had been perfectly comfortable with that work-righteous salvation plan – right up until he heard Jesus. And saw what Jesus did.

Do you see his problem? The Jews, and in particular their religious leaders, wanted to condemn Jesus as a false prophet because he condemned their salvation plan. Yet they were troubled by a logical inconsistency: *How could a false prophet perform such extraordinary signs without the power of God working in and through him? And if the power of God is working in and through this man, how could he possibly be a false prophet?* Evidently Nicodemus was able to work through the problem and came to the only possible conclusion – which is exactly what he 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."** The **"we"** obviously doesn't mean all members of the Sanhedrin, but probably indicates there were others (like Joseph of Arimathea) who agreed.

What Jesus immediately understood was that this confused soul was *asking for directions*. He believed in God and wanted to spend eternity with him in heaven, but he was suddenly uncertain about how to get where he wanted to go. And suddenly Jesus' reply makes all the sense in the world, because he was offering to Nicodemus the *directions* for which he was asking, the *directions* he so desperately needed: **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."** (*"You want to spend eternity with God in his kingdom? You cannot get*

there unless you are born again. You certainly cannot get there by the work-righteous road you now travel.")

Don't miss the profound wisdom and perfection of these words. Not only did Jesus point to the Sacrament of Baptism as the means to enter into a faith-relationship with God, he pointed Nicodemus to the simplest act imaginable – an action where God works, not man; where God creates saving faith through simple water empowered by the Word of God, and where man is just the unworthy recipient of God's amazing grace.

Jesus answer also masterfully led Nicodemus forward. It beckoned him onward. It wasn't immediately understandable to Nicodemus – in fact it seemed to make no sense at all – but it continued to pull him forward, toward the truth that would save him.

And just as suddenly this whole text opens up for us today in a way that could easily have escaped us. Jesus continues in our text to draw us forward, as he also drew Nicodemus: ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The rebirth you need is provided for you in the waters of baptism. "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." You want to get to heaven? You've come to the right place for directions, because I'm the only one who has been there. "And 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. I, Jesus, as going to open that narrow path for you by my death on the cross. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Those are the only directions you, or any other human being, will ever need. Believe that Jesus came to earth to pay your sin debt, and you know – know – the way. Easier still, I will have my angels carry you to God's heaven when your time here on earth is finished. Amen.***

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Genesis 12:1-9** Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ⁴ ¶ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. ⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

^{ESV} **Romans 4:1-8, 13-17** What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." ¹³ ¶ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ ¶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring--not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

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The Second Sunday in Lent – March 8, 2020

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 156 (Red Hymnal)

"Not All the Blood of Beasts"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Genesis 12:1-9) It is hard to imagine the difficulties and dangers that Abraham faced when told by God to pack up and move his family to a foreign land. He lived in brutal, violent times where no civil authorities could be trusted to help. He placed his trust in his God, who alone can be trusted - whatever the circumstances.

Psalm 51 (Supplement page 28) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Romans 4:1-8, 13-17) Our second reading actually builds on our first lesson. While Abraham was certainly an obedient and exemplary servant of his God, it was not through his works or actions that he was saved. As is the case with all mankind, Abraham was saved by grace through faith in God's promise of a Savior. So also here the Apostle Paul makes clear that it is wrong to imagine that Abraham was saved by any other means.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 141 (Red Hymnal)

"Enslaved by Sin and Bound in Chains"

The Sermon – Text: John 3:1-17 (Printed on the back page)

"Asking for Directions"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers (Offerings can be placed in the box on the wall near the exit door)

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 145 (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus, Refuge of the Weary"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 47 (Red Hymnal)

"Savior, Again to Thy Dear Name We Raise"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!
To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (28) Average (40) Wednesday (19)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
Wednesday	-5:45 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Mid-Week Lenten Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-11:20 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting

CLC News – Teacher Neil Bernthal is considering the call to Holy Trinity of West Columbia. Teacher Joshua Ohlmann is considering the call to Redeemer of Cheyenne. Pastor Matthew Hanel is considering the call to Living Savior of Eden Prairie. Faith of Markesan School has called Mrs. Sara Ude. There are two graduates from the ILC Seminary this spring and one teacher graduate.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet during the fellowship hour next Sunday.

West Central Delegate Conference – WDCD is scheduled for May 19-21 in Denver. Those willing and able to represent St Paul as delegates please see Pastor Roehl.

Church Projects – As you can see, the screens have been purchased and the inner door locks have been installed. We are hoping to get the screens mounted and to run cabling this week. Please let Pastor Roehl know if and when you could be available to lend a hand.