

This Lent we are engaged in our Parish Reading Project, reading together through the Gospel According to John. And this year, for 4 weeks in fact, we have back-to-back readings from John that line up reasonably well with the sections we're reading each week. The only one that doesn't is next week. Next week our Gospel lesson is from chapter 4 of John, which was part of our parish readings this week. So I'm going to defer talking about chapter 4 until next week. Today I'm going to mainly talk about chapter 3 of John.

But before that I want to mention a couple of aspects that are unique to John.

One of them is geographical. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the adult Jesus only visits Jerusalem at the end of his life, the last week of his life, Holy Week. Yes, Luke also mentions a couple of visits Jesus made to Jerusalem as a child. But as a group, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the synoptic Gospels, focus on Jesus' ministry in Galilee. And only between Palm Sunday and Good Friday does he minister in Jerusalem.

Not so with John. In John, Jesus makes numerous trips to Jerusalem. We saw in our readings last week, that Jesus went to Jerusalem in chapter 2. And in chapter 3 he is still there. And that's where he meets with the Jewish leader, Nicodemus. And they have a rather long conversation.

And this is something else unique to John. The other Gospels have more "scenes" than John. There's actually a more technical term, but for our purposes I'll just stick with the word "scene."

For example, Mark is especially fast paced, with many "scene changes," about 75 total. Matthew and Luke are longer and have about 130 and 120 different scenes respectively. In these Gospels Jesus goes from place to place, and engages in one thing, then another, then another.

But John's pace is slower. There are far fewer scenes, only about 30 total. And the scenes tend to be longer. And Jesus often has more intense interactions with people, and the interactions are far more in depth.

This situation actually reminds me of a movie biography. Most movie biographies have many, many scenes. You see the person at a number of times and stages, passing through numerous events in their life.

But in 2015 a different kind of biography was released. The film *Steve Jobs* didn't take you through the entire life of Steve Jobs. Instead, it focused on three very brief periods on 3 particular days of Steve's life, one in 1984, one in 1988, one in 1998. It told its story basically in 3 scenes, 3 acts.

The Gospel of John tends to function more like the film *Steve Jobs*. To be sure, there are more than 3 scenes or 3 acts. But in John there is a definite tendency to zero in and go deep and to really marinate in things for a while. And we see the first example of this today's Gospel. And we'll see similar trends in our Gospels for the next 3 weeks too.

Today, in chapter 3, we have the encounter with Nicodemus. In the first verse of ch3, we're told that Nicodemus is a leader of the Jews. He's a member the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, the ones who will eventually put Jesus on trial.

While Jesus is in Jerusalem, Nicodemus comes to Jesus "by night."

John loves symbolism. Anytime in John that you see a reference to night, you should also think "in the dark." Spiritually in the dark. Nicodemus is in the dark, and he's seeking out Jesus, the light of the world.

But also, by coming at night, Nicodemus is sneaking around a bit. He won't have to worry about being seen. He won't risk his reputation with the rest of the ruling council. He'll make a stealth visit to Jesus so that no one will know.

And he begins a conversation with Jesus that indicates that he is curious about Jesus. But it's clear that it's also a conversation that Nicodemus is expecting to go in a certain direction. His first words are telling.

Nicodemus begins by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know..." That's a telling conversational opening.

Nicodemus is saying a couple of things. First, he calls Jesus, Rabbi. This is an honorific. But it's also a title that could apply to Nicodemus. So he's not paying Jesus any great honor. He's putting Jesus at the same level as himself.

He's saying, "Let's talk, Rabbi to Rabbi, teacher to teacher. Let's have nice little professional discussion as equals."

And the second thing Nicodemus says, "We know..." What a telling statement: "We know..." In other words, "I'm going to lay out my knowledge. I'm going to lay out a nice little thesis. And then we can debate it. And we'll have a nice little intellectual, professional discussion, rabbi to rabbi, teacher to teacher."

Nicodemus says, "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."¹

At one level it's not too bad of a statement. It gives some acknowledgement that Jesus is in God's service. But on the other hand, it lumps Jesus in with a whole host of other human teachers in God's service. Again, it lumps Jesus in with Nicodemus himself. It's an equalizing statement.

But it completely misses who Jesus is. John has already told us. Jesus is not just a human being who serves God. He is the Son of God. In chapter 1, John told us that Jesus is the

¹ Jn 3:2

Word made flesh.² He is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart,³ who makes God knowable and visible.

So Nicodemus is not sitting across from a fellow teacher, a fellow man of God, a fellow servant of God. Nicodemus is sitting across from God himself; God incarnate; "God with us" in Jesus.

So Nicodemus starts by addressing Jesus as an equal, and wants to have a nice discussion. But Jesus isn't going to play that game.

In fact, Jesus blows his mind. Jesus pushes the envelope. Jesus talks about being born again or being born from above. He also talks about the Holy Spirit being like the wind, blowing where it wants to blow.

He's saying, 'Nicodemus, you think you've got God figured out? You think you've got God pigeon-holed into neat little categories? Well, think again. God is like the wind. You might feel the wind, but you don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes. You can't control it.'

It's so overwhelming to Nicodemus. All he can ask is, "How" and "How?" "How can anyone be born after having grown old?"⁴ And "How can these things be?"⁵

So Jesus tries to make it easy. Jesus tries to cut through the clutter. He basically says that Nicodemus needs to trust in what he, Jesus, is saying about God. Jesus says, in effect, there's only one possible person who can tell you fully about God. That's the one who came down from heaven. That's the Son. In other word Jesus is saying, 'That's me.' Put your trust in me. Believe the things I'm telling you.

And then Jesus talks about being lifted up on the cross. In John, the cross is Jesus' destination. It is his mission. It is his goal. It is his glorification. Jesus is going to be lifted up so that all may believe in him and have eternal life.

That's the crux of the famous next verse, John 3:16, "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."

And that's the message of the next verse, John 3:17: "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."

² Jn 1:14

³ Jn 1:18

⁴ Jn 3:4

⁵ Jn 3:9

The cross is not a sign of judgment or cruelty or condemnation. Rather it is a means of bringing wholeness, of bringing fullness of life, of bringing healing to a broken and hurting world.

Jesus will speak a couple more times in John about being lifted up on the cross. And he will speak MANY more times about the necessity of believing in him. After all, as I mentioned last week, that's the purpose statement of John:

"These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."⁶

So, does Nicodemus believe at this point? We don't know. I suspect not. But Nicodemus is making some changes. He is growing spiritually. And we will meet Nicodemus two more times in John.

The first is in John ch7. The council discusses the thorny problem of Jesus. And Nicodemus speaks up. He's still hiding a little bit. He's not very public about specifically defending Jesus. He's rather timid, like a turtle slowly sticking his head out of his shell. But he does do something. He takes a baby step. He asks basically, 'Shouldn't we at least hear from Jesus before we make up our minds about him?' He gets shot down pretty quickly and he retreats back into his shell. Nevertheless, he shows that he is willing to go a few inches out on the limb for Jesus. It's a baby step. But it's probably indicative of Nicodemus believing just a little bit. However he's not yet all in.

But we also hear about Nicodemus again in Jn ch19. And this time Nicodemus is doing more than just taking a baby step. After the crucifixion, Nicodemus, along with another council member, Joseph of Arimathea, are the ones who bury Jesus. This is something VERY public. They have to get special permission from Pontius Pilate. They have to take Jesus down from the cross in a public execution area. And they have to bury him in broad daylight.

Nicodemus first comes to Jesus by night. But now, in the light, he is showing himself to be a follower of Jesus. He may not be a full-blown believer. But at least he is publicly willing to be seen as a follower of Jesus. It shows at least that he is growing in belief.

But that's going to be a continuing pattern and theme in John: growing in belief. We'll certainly come back to that next time.

In the meantime, may God help all of us as we grow in our belief.

⁶ Jn 20:31