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Genesis 12:1-4  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17  
John 3:1-17

## TRYING TO REACH YOU

So, what do you think. If you were Nicodemus, would you feel positive about this exchange? Would you feel good about the answers to the questions you had asked? Why didn't Jesus just tell Nicodemus what he wanted to know—what to do and how to think? Why didn't Jesus just affirm what Nicodemus wanted him to affirm—that all those who oppose the Pharisees were wrong and that they were, indeed, the ones who possessed the truth, the keys to the kingdom of God? But why didn't Jesus just say outright, "Nicodemus, you're a sinner, and you are going to hell. You need to repent and believe in me. One day I will come back; and if you are not ready, you will burn in hell forever." That would have been so much easier. Jesus could also have used our favorite: if this, then that. If you do this and this and this, then you will get that result. Anything but what he said—all the metaphors, all the imagery, all the plays on words.

Jesus is trying to teach us to think, trying to reach beyond our pre-conceived decisions about who he is and what he is doing in our lives. Did you listen closely to the conversation he is having with Nicodemus? Nicodemus starts off with what he knows (or what he thinks he knows). Jesus says, "You think I am someone I am not. If you want to know who I am, something will have to happen in your life over which you have no control—something frightening, something wonderful, something miraculous."

Jesus speaks about being born from above. I told the people in the early service, so I will tell you that my brother was born at home. There aren't many generations that can still say that. I was the baby of the family, so I had a really fancy hospital in which to be born. But my brother was born in my mother and father's bedroom. It tells you how rural they were.

The night my mother went into labor, the doctor came and he said to my father that he didn't think she was even close, and that he would come back tomorrow. My father kept an old 22-caliber rifle over the mantle. He looked at the rifle and looked at the doctor, looked back at the rifle, then invited the doctor to sit down to play some cards. The doctor stayed. So there was plenty of fear, but even today with the most modern medical facilities we can put together, there is still fear in the heart of any woman who goes into labor. It's impossible that with birth there would not be some fear. Oh sure, it turns into joy and tears later, but before it happens, there is enough fear to last a lifetime.

So Nicodemus says, "I don't know what you mean." Jesus sets out metaphors, hidden meanings, beautiful language (that's why we love it.) It's so gorgeous to say, "God so loved the world", but we misunderstand it just as surely as Nicodemus did. For the words are no sooner out of Jesus' mouth when Nicodemus is asking, "How do I do this? What does Jesus do?" He answers a question with a question.

Lee Grimes tells a story about a man who looked at this world and saw people loving each other. This man saw that love was a beautiful thing, but it also involved risk and trust and people got hurt when trust was broken. The man decided not to allow himself to be hurt—not to allow himself to love—because the risk was simply too great. This man also saw people striving for greatness, men and women pursuing high ideals and goals. Their lives were dedicated and disciplined, and their efforts were met with varying degrees of accomplishment that were mixed with disappointment and perceived failures, all at great emotional pain and cost. He decided that the pursuit of lofty goals and high ideals were simply too risky; the cost was too great. Then he looked around and he saw people serving others, giving themselves, spending their time with people, people who could never return the extent of personal investment of money and time from those who did not have to give. Some of the people were ungrateful receivers. And some of the givers were tired. (In another tradition, you would say, Amen.) So he decided it was time to give up working with others and for those who had so much less. The risk was just too great. Ungrateful receivers and weary givers. And so he lived his life, undiminished, unburdened, unsoiled by this world, free from hurts and worries. But life that is always safe—life that is risk-free—is no life at all.

Nicodemus wanted some guarantees, and so do we. We want God to guarantee that if we do this and this, then we will get what we ask God to give us. Nicodemus was asking the wrong questions, and so are we. What does it mean to be in God's presence? What does it mean to be at one with God and understand that we are part of God's kingdom? What does it mean when Jesus gives that most famous of all answers about how we are to live? Jesus says that if you want to go to heaven, you need to start experiencing God completely with you now. Isn't that what heaven is, being in God's presence forever? Forever means it starts here and now. God's presence. God so loved the world. But what the scriptures really say is: God so loved the cosmos.

And what do we hear? God so loved the people. Yes, we're part of God's created order, but when God says that God loves everything that God has created, as we sang a minute ago, that which came out of nothing, the creation described in Genesis in the call of Abraham to be God's people, God is saying, "I love and I want you to be part of the healing that my son is bringing. I love people you don't think I love and I grant healing in ways that you don't think are whole." God gave us his one and only son so that this life can be about more than avoiding punishment. God gave us Jesus so we could begin to live life, a real life, that we will inherit completely one day, but we begin that life now. We have a one-of-a-kind God and we have a one-of-a-kind life because of God's love. Doesn't there have to be more than our trust in God than to believe that Jesus came to tell us how bad we are?

Nicodemus is a strange and conflicted fellow. You have to love him and you have to have sympathy for him. He wants to follow, but all he can do is ask how, when all the while the real power and goodness of the gospel is not the "hows," it's the "whos." The who is Jesus, and the what associated with Jesus is that we are offered healing, regeneration, rebirth, as frightening as it may be, for we are part of the cosmos that God loves so much. Amen.