

**Airplane Mode: Silencing the Noise to Amplify God
The Noise of the Familiar (John 3:1-17; Lent 2A)**

Rev. Melissa Hatfield

First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-noise-of-the-familiar/

On social media, sometimes people begin a post with “I was today years old when ...” People use this phrase when they are about to reveal something they just learned that blew their minds or something that makes them question if they ever really knew anything in life at all.

Here are a few examples from some online posts.

- ... I was today years old when I learned the straw in a Capri Sun is supposed to be the dot of the “I.”
- ... I was today years old when I learned baby carrots are just shaved down big carrots.
- ... I was today years old when I learned how long owl legs are.
- ... I was today years old when I learned this American Gothic painting depicts a farmer and his *daughter*, not his wife. (Don’t get your phones out right now to fact-check me. You’ll just have to trust me for about 20 more minutes.)

I don’t know how old Nicodemus was when he met Jesus. But I know after meeting Jesus, his Facebook status would have said, “I was today years old when I learned I have to be born all over again to see the kingdom of God.” Mind-blown.

Nicodemus was a religious leader known as a Pharisee. Author Frederick Buechner described him as a religious VIP with a list of credentials as long as your arm. He was a teacher of Israel, a ruler of the Jews, and a trained theologian charged with teaching others the way of God and enforcing the law. He knew many things about matters of faith and religion. It is safe to assume he was a man of deep faith, deeply devoted to his God and his people, praying often and honestly to the one true God of Israel, and above all: a man for whom the Torah and the law were everything. It was his job as one of the Pharisees to know every commandment given to the people of God, inside and out, and he was good at it. Many, perhaps even Nicodemus himself, would have said he had all the answers.

And, yet, he had questions. Questions for and about Jesus.

Nicodemus is one of many seekers the Gospel of John tells us about. Nicodemus has seen or heard of the miraculous signs of Jesus. Surely only someone from God and whom God is with could do such things. There is no hint of ulterior motives, none of the intentional traps Jesus

will often encounter with other religious leaders. Just “Nick at nite,” trying to listen to what Jesus was saying while surrounded by the noise of all that was known and familiar to him as a devoted religious leader.

Nicodemus and Jesus share this fascinating and mind-blowing conversation one evening. Unimpressed with Nicodemus’s admiration for the signs and his religious resume, Jesus gets straight to it, telling Nicodemus that the noise of everything he is familiar with keeps him from hearing God. All his achievements, morality, rule-following, heritage, position none of these are it. He must be born again, born anew, take it from the top and start all over again.

Poor Nick. I’m not sure what he expected to hear from this Rabbi who performed great signs, but a discussion on being born again was not it.

He responds to Jesus, asking, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

I’ve heard my share of blonde jokes over the years. One of my favorites is, “A guy was driving in a car with a blonde. He told her to stick her head out the window and see if the blinker worked. She stuck her head out and said, “Yes, No, Yes, No, Yes...”

Because we seem to prefer to think the worst of folks, Nicodemus often gets labeled a coward for coming to Jesus under the cover of night so others wouldn’t see him and thought of as “the blonde Pharisee” for asking this question about a second physical birth.

Maybe it was an honest response from someone who thinks more concretely than abstractly. Perhaps Nicodemus was just stalling while he tried to grasp what Jesus was saying. Or maybe Nicodemus was stating a deeper reality: when you’re old, you’ve been formed in many beliefs and set in many ways. How can anyone go back in time and unlearn all that makes them who they are? Perhaps it is as difficult to unlearn things we’ve always believed, to change who we’ve always been, then to become a baby in a womb again.

Nicodemus probably did not feel like he had a choice in who he had become. Most likely, he was raised in a Pharisee household, educated in the Pharisee school of Jewish thought from a child and set on a course that made him who he was. But now Jesus was challenging him to make a choice that would deeply alter who he was. To make the choice to rethink everything. To radically change from viewing the kingdom of God through the lens of the Pharisees, to viewing the kingdom of God through the new lens of Jesus. No easy task.

I don’t think Jesus thought Nicodemus was a coward or clueless. Jesus seems to honor Nicodemus as the respected theologian he is by entrusting him with this deep, mind-blowing discourse about new things Nicodemus is unfamiliar with. Jesus sees potential and a desire in Nicodemus to silence the noise of the familiar, so he could unlearn and relearn everything in

light of Jesus. He has come at night, which is another way of saying he is "in the dark." He wants more. He knows he is lacking something. And Jesus tells him he is correct. He does need more, a more that is so profound it is like a rebirth. But it won't be easy. Jesus is asking Nicodemus to completely rethink everything he had devoted his life to and to do this after a nighttime conversation with a thirty-something carpenter with no formal education talking about concepts radically different from everything Nicodemus has believed and taught.ⁱ

It is no wonder that Nicodemus goes away still pondering these mysteries. I imagine Nicodemus had many sleepless nights in Jerusalem, meditating on what Jesus told him and asking God deep questions while he fought the noise of the familiar and known.

Nicodemus's encounter in John chapter 3 closes with more questions than answers.

But it isn't the end of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. He briefly appears in John chapter 7 when religious leaders discuss what to do about Jesus. When the others are ready to kill Jesus, Nicodemus speaks up and begs his colleagues to give Jesus a fair hearing.

We see Nicodemus one final time in the Gospel of John after Jesus' arrest and death on the cross. Nicodemus accompanies Joseph of Arimathea to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus. Nicodemus brought a mixture of incredibly expensive spices, and they wrapped Jesus' body in strips of linen along with the spices before laying his body in the tomb. I wonder if that nighttime conversation with Jesus played over and over in Nicodemus's mind as he wrapped each strip around the body of Jesus. "Just 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. 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. 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." (3.14-17)

Nicodemus does this beautiful and tender thing for Jesus. But why? Was Nicodemus merely sad at the death of a great teacher, or had he been broken and changed forever by looking upon the Son of Man lifted up? Did Nicodemus continue to be distracted by all the noise of what he had always believed, or was he finally able to silence the noise and listen to Jesus calling him to something new, something more life-giving than what he had known?

And what happened three days later when the rumors started that Jesus is not dead but alive? Did Nicodemus come to Jesus, this time in the light of day, and see him in his glory? Did the hands that tenderly washed Jesus's lifeless body reach out to embrace the resurrected body of Christ?ⁱⁱ Did Nicodemus ever finally post, "I was today years old when I believed Jesus is the Son of God. I've been born anew not through my works but through the work of the Spirit!" While many believe he did, the Bible doesn't tell us. I hope Nicodemus could finally hear Jesus above all the noise. That one day, Nicodemus no longer asked, "How can this be?" but instead came to

declare with absolute certainty because it had happened to him, **“This can be! You can be born anew.”**

I’ve not birthed any babies, but I’ve had the joy of being present for three births. What a miracle. I’m not an expert, but I think it is safe to say babies don’t do a lot to be born. They release certain markers and enzymes that let the mother’s body know something big is about to happen, and the baby moves into a position as it looks for more room. But the baby can’t just crawl on up out of there. The mommas do the breathing and pushing and yelling. Birth happens to us, not because of us. We had no control or power in bringing about our physical birth.

I think this is why Jesus used this rebirth metaphor. The same is true for our spiritual birth or our birth from above. Almost everything in John 3 makes it clear that this business of getting born again or starting anew is something with which we have very little to do. What we can do, what Jesus tells Nicodemus and us to do, is silence the noise, turn our gaze to Jesus, and allow the wind of the Spirit to usher us into the kingdom of God, a new way of living and seeing that reflects the heart and eyes of Jesus.

Nicodemus had spent his entire life trying to control and engineer his way into the kingdom of God. It’s a check-the-box kind of faith. We focus on the externals, like going to church, reading my Bible, being good, or fasting. Even when Jesus tells him he must be born anew, Nicodemus’s main question is *how*. He wanted Jesus to show him the way. He didn’t expect Jesus to **be** the way. Jesus is the way to God. When we look in faith to Jesus, receiving what has been done FOR us rather than by us, our nature is changed, the kingdom of God opens to us, and we are given eternal life, life to the fullest, not one day, but starting in the here and now.

The Spirit of God is always on the move, like a spring breeze. We cannot control or conjure up God’s Spirit any more than we can direct the wind, but we can open the windows of our hearts to receive it. We can open our lives, turn on airplane mode, and create space to amplify God’s voice.

In our Lent small groups that began this week, over 65 individuals are learning to do just that – to open space for God through different rhythms or practices. We are learning the spiritual life begins with the longing that stirs way down deep, underneath the noise, the activity, and the hustle of our lives. That longing indicates God’s Spirit is already at work within us, within you. Our role is to open space for God to do what only God to do, to open the windows of our lives and let the Spirit move, to turn off the noise to so we can truly listen to God.

I find Nicodemus’s story so honest. Not easy, but honest. His story is a story for all of us who have more questions than answers. For those who spend more time than we would care to admit wrestling with our faith. Jesus meets us even more in our curiosity than our certainty.

May we be brave enough to ask questions, even silly ones, and trust enough to not fear strange answers that make us relearn and rethink everything in light of Jesus.

It is a story for those of us who have lived with a certain lens for our entire lives about what is important and what matters most, and yet, the things we hear about Jesus and the new things the Spirit seems to be doing, have put a crack in that lens. God does new things. A church courageous enough to not limit who God can call as their lead pastor understands this. The wind blows where the wind blows. How can we, as individuals and a church, continue to be born anew through the love of God rather than loyalty to what we've always known or always done?

Nicodemus's story is also for those of us who come to Jesus in the night times of our lives, in the darkness of pain and loss, anxiety and loneliness, who come exhausted and depleted from trying to birth something new on our own. You don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to pull yourself up by your spiritual bootstraps. Jesus knows you want more, a more so profound it is like a rebirth. That desire is the Spirit of God already at work in you. So, turn down the noise and distractions, make space, and keep your gaze on Jesus. The same Spirit will birth something new in you.

Wherever we are this morning, whether in the darkness or the light, hear these powerful words once again because it can't be said enough:

For God so loved the world that God sent forth God's very self in the form of his precious and beloved Son, so that everyone who dares to believe, despite all the noise and all the darkness, whoever believes will not die but will have life. Life now and life to come. God did not send Jesus to condemn the world but to offer us life, hope and salvation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray.

God of open windows and open spaces, we are all like Nicodemus. We have many questions. We cannot fathom what you teach us. We are mystified at what you tell us. The noise of what is familiar can be loud. Yet we dare to believe and to listen to your voice above all others. For you call us from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from death to life. Come Holy Spirit and Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ <https://brianzahnd.com/tag/nicodemus/>

ⁱⁱ <https://jesusscribbles.wordpress.com/2018/09/23/sermon-on-nicodemus-trinity-sunday/>