



The Book of Signs - Week 2

Week 2, Day 1

John 3:1-21 -- Nicodemus visits Jesus at night

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, 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 a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just 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, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

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. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Understanding the Text:

This week, we will look at the varying responses of four potential followers of Jesus. As you read each passage, place yourself in the role of the would-be follower and then ask yourself if you would respond in the same way they did.

We begin with Nicodemus, who is described as a Pharisee and leader of the Jews. Frederick Buechner described him as “a VIP with a big theological reputation to uphold.” He was well-known in Jerusalem, a leader in the temple, and rightly concerned that anyone would see him with Jesus, this upstart from Galilee who was rumored to have performed a sign at a wedding in Cana.

Accordingly, he chooses to visit Jesus under the cover of darkness, at night. The closing verses in this passage offer some context to a theme that pervades the whole Gospel of John: light is good, darkness is evil. The gospel opens, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:5) Jesus is described repeatedly as the light and good things are shown to happen during the day. On the other hand, “those who do evil hate the light” – night falls as Judas leaves the Last Supper, Jesus is betrayed and arrested at night, Peter denies Jesus at night, Nicodemus comes at night.

Notice that Nicodemus doesn’t ask who Jesus is – instead he tells him, “we know you are a teacher...”. Without getting to know Jesus, he makes his own assessment. Even though he proceeds to ask Jesus a question (“how can anyone be born after growing old?”), he doesn’t seem to really listen to Jesus’ answer. The last thing he says is, “how can this be?” and we can picture him walking away shaking his head and whispering his question over and over again to himself. We are liable to fall into the same trap – not truly seeing who God is or what God has for us – when we make our own assessments about God and don’t bother to listen to the guiding of the Holy Spirit.

The discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus is interesting because of the multiple meanings of the Greek word *anōthen*. It can mean either “again” or “from above.” Though Jesus’ words indicate that he means born “from above”, Nicodemus, asking how one can be born of their mother a second time, clearly hears it as “again.” He is so sure of his own interpretation that he misses what Jesus is trying to tell him.

It is precisely when we become too sure of what we know about God or have Jesus figured out or have contained the Holy Spirit to an understandable phenomenon that we need our certainty to be upended. We cannot experience being born from above or abundant life if we are trying to control every variable.

So what is this idea of being born from above? What does it mean? Briefly, it is about experiencing the world through the lens of the upside-down kingdom. Instead of measuring one’s life on the world’s values of greed, excessiveness, power, selfishness, and exclusivity, a person is guided by the ideals of humility, kindness, inclusivity, generosity, and meekness.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Are you tempted to tell Jesus who you think he is (and accordingly, how you think he should serve you)?
2. Has God ever changed your understanding of God’s self? What was that situation or experience like?
3. What does it mean to you to be born from above?

Week 2, Day 2

John 3:16-17

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.

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.

Understanding the Text:

John 3:16 is, quite possibly, the most famous verse in scripture. It’s not even that the words themselves are famous – though they are well known – but the reference itself. The bottom of every soda cup at In-and-Out Burger has “John 3:16” printed on it. Tim Tebow played football with “John” and “3:16” under each of his eyes. It is printed on the underside of Forever 21 shopping bags. People stand on street corners with nothing but “John 3:16” printed on posterboard.

Why? Why is that verse so ubiquitous? Put simply, it is a beautiful summary of how God loves us. But it is often read out of context and without full understanding of the grammar, so let’s explore it further today.

The word “believe” appears just 31 times in all of the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) *combined*. Yet in the Gospel of John, there is some variation of “believe” 84 times. It’s important to understand that the Greek word for believe, *pisteo*, can be translated as trust, depend, obey, and assurance. It is not about assent to a certain doctrine but is grounded in relationship.

One of the dangers of John 3:16 is that we are used to hearing it quoted on its own. It is wielded as a weapon by some Christians who use it to exclude folks rather than reading through the continuation of Jesus’ words in 3:17 – the *goal* is for the whole world to be saved through Jesus. Angela Zimmerman, a Lutheran pastor in Jerusalem, writes that John 3:16 “is not a threat. It is a promise.”

Hearing the scripture in isolation means that it is also easy to forget that Jesus said these words to Nicodemus in the context of explaining how to be born from above. This re-birth comes by being crucified with Christ. It is precisely through Christ’s sacrifice that we are able to be in relationship with him – not because we earned it or worked our way into it. We have to trust in God’s goodness and mercy as expressed through Jesus, and when we do so, we experience eternal life.

Finally, New Testament professor Sarah Heinrich points out that the “so” in John 3:16 is widely misunderstood. The Greek *houtosmeans* should be translated in the sense of “just so,” or “in this way,” or the more archaic, “thusly.” The verse could be translated as, “This is *the way* God loved the world, with the result that he gave his only Son, in order that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” She writes that John 3:16 is not about *how much* God loved the world, but rather the *way* God loved the world.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. When you see John 3:16 displayed publicly, what do you think?
2. What does “believe” mean to you in this context? Do the other meanings of *pisteo* help paint a different picture for you?
3. How does the interpretation of *houtosmeans* above help you understand John 3:16?

Week 2, Day 3

John 4:1-30, 39-42

¹ Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” ²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— ³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Understanding the Text:

What on earth compelled Jesus to go through Samaria? Verse 4 implies that he had to go through Samaria, but that is not geographically true. Most Jews traveling between Judea and Galilee would cross the Jordan River and go north that way. No self-respecting Jew would want to come into

contact with a Samaritan if they could avoid it for an interaction would require ritual cleansing. It would be even more scandalous since the text tells us Jesus' disciples had gone into the city to buy food, effectively leaving him alone as he encounters the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well.

The rift between the Jews and Samaritans goes back many centuries. Samaritans considered themselves to be descendants of the Northern Kingdom (Samaria became the capitol of the kingdom that seceded from Judah after the death of Solomon). Their place of worship was Mount Gerizim rather than the temple in Jerusalem and the Jews viewed Samaritans as idol worshippers. While the Jews scriptural tradition included the Torah as well as the prophets, the Samaritans focused solely on Torah teachings.

Though it doesn't work geographically, verse 4 makes when we think about Jesus' mission to the whole world, not just the Jews. Samaria would be the last place a Jewish person would think God would show love, but it is a pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry. Until now, he has only interacted with his own people in Galilee and Jerusalem.

The interaction between Jesus and this woman, though it seems personal, is really a "wooing of Samaria" (to use the words of New Testament professor Sandra Schneiders). If we were to read the scripture like a Texan, we'd see that "you" in verse 21 and 22 is actually plural, implying that Jesus is talking about all Samaritans:

²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when **y'all** will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² **y'all** worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.

Jesus discounts both the Samaritans' place of worship as well as the Jews'. Instead of worshipping God on "this mountain" (Gerizim) or in Jerusalem, true worshippers will worship God *in spirit and truth*. Through the sacrifice of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, worship will not be confined to physical places.

Schneiders also points out that the five previous husbands symbolize the gods of the five foreign tribes that the Samaritans have accepted the worship of, and the one who is not currently her husband represents the incomplete worship of God. This makes Jesus number seven, which is the number of perfection.

The contrast between this woman and Nicodemus is great. While Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the cover of darkness, the woman at the well meets Jesus at noon, the brightest time of day. Nicodemus tells Jesus who Jesus is and doesn't listen to Jesus' response, instead questioning "how can this be?" But this woman hears Jesus say, "I am he (the Messiah)" and runs off to tell everyone in the city because she believes him.

Why does the text mention that she left her water jar when she went to tell the people in town about Jesus? (v. 28) Can we assume it's something as inane as her being forgetful and in a hurry to report her wild encounter? The translation is not left, but more closely rendered as "let go." She was willing to let go of the old things that defined her (being marginalized, embarrassed, cast aside) in pursuit of the new thing – Jesus and his living water – that would give her a new life. Maybe there is something that defines you and you need Jesus to help you re-write your story. Or maybe your water jar is something that satisfies you in place of Jesus. The longer you hold tightly to those things, the more you will struggle to hear Jesus call himself the Messiah.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is the “living water” that Jesus offers?
2. What is the “water jar” you need to let go of in order to fully embrace Jesus?

Week 2, Day 4

John 4:46-54

⁴⁶ Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. ⁴⁷ When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” ⁴⁹ The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my little boy dies.” ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. ⁵¹ As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. ⁵² So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, “Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.” ⁵³ The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” So he himself believed, along with his whole household. ⁵⁴ Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

Understanding the Text:

Jesus’ words in verse 48 can be confusing. In the NRSV (above), it seems like Jesus is agreeing that people need to see signs and wonders in order to believe in him. The Message translation makes it plain that Jesus was frustrated by folks’ reliance on signs before belief: “Unless you people are dazzled by a miracle, you refuse to believe.”

Since chapter 2, we have seen occasions that people believe *because* of the signs:

- Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:11)
- When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. (John 2:23)
- He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.” (John 3:2)
- When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the festival; for they too had gone to the festival. (John 4:45)

Though Jesus does these signs to point to God, he does not want people to rely on spectacular events for belief. Jesus wants the people to trust him even without the dazzling miracles.

Jesus puts off the royal official with the rebuff that he won’t believe until he is wowed by a miracle, but the man is persistent. He presses Jesus again to come save his little boy, not taking Jesus’ initial response for a final answer. Jesus tells him to return home and that his boy will be healed. The man hasn’t seen it happen – he is a multi-hour journey away from his son. But even without a vision of the dazzling miracle, he trusts that Jesus’ word is true and he returns home to find that his son is, in fact, healed.

In the same way, we are often called on by God to act on our faith rather than acting in response to marvelous, eye-catching, almost-unbelievable works of God. Without seeing how God will move, we

don't know what will happen, but our part of the relationship is held up by trusting in God even in the mundane or mysterious moments.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. The royal official was willing to do whatever it took to save his son. What are some things you have done in a crisis that seem extreme? How quickly do you turn to prayer and asking for God's help?
2. The man was not deterred by Jesus' first response. Do you let yourself get deterred when things don't turn out the way you want them to the first time?
3. Do you rely on the dazzling works of God for belief? What does it look like to trust God before God moves in a situation? Is that easy or hard for you?

Week 2, Day 5

John 5:1-18

¹ After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

² Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³ In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" ⁷ The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." ⁸ Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." ⁹ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. ¹⁰ So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, "It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." ¹¹ But he answered them, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" ¹² They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take it up and walk?'" ¹³ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. ¹⁴ Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you." ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶ Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. ¹⁷ But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." ¹⁸ For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Understanding the Text:

When you buy a new oven these days, you can choose one with a "sabbath setting." It allows your oven to override the automatic 12-hour shutoff so that you do not have to turn it on during the Sabbath. Jews that observe Halakha, the 613 laws contained in the Torah, cannot cook raw food during Sabbath, but food that already cooked beforehand may be kept warm until mealtime. This same level of absolute observance to each law has a long history – it defined the Pharisees that were upset by Jesus' healing work on the Sabbath. It was not just the healing that caused alarm, but also Jesus equating himself to the Father. They were furious that he would essentially call himself God.

They were not the only ones that missed the miraculous healing and focused on the wrong thing. The man who was healed didn't seem to even get it. When Jesus asks him if he wants to be made

well, he responds with an excuse as to why he has been laying there for 38 years. He never bothered to find out who it was that healed him nor did he express belief or trust in Jesus following the healing. In fact, he directs the religious leaders to Jesus, which leads to persecution and a plot to kill him.

This healing reminds us that God's intervention in our lives does not depend on our faith. We can no more "make" God heal us than this man – who didn't even ask to be healed – could. This should be a relief to us! We don't have to achieve perfection before God will work in our lives. We cannot pull ourselves up by the bootstraps into healing but must learn to submit to and rely on God. Does that feel harder than doing the work ourselves? Sometimes, yes. We have to learn to trust the slow work of God even when we do not see it and trust that God loves us so much that God always wants wholeness for us.

As an aside, did you notice that verse 4 is missing? Most translations of scripture leave it out because it is not found in any of the earliest extant manuscripts of the Gospel of John. Later manuscripts included an asterisk at the verse to warn the scribe that would copy it that the verse was probably not original. Additionally, the end of the verse contains Greek words that are found nowhere else in the Gospel, further indicating that it was a later addition to the text. For your reference, this is verse 4 as it appears in some translations:

⁴For an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What do you make of the fact that the man doesn't answer Jesus directly when Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed?
2. Why do you think the man drew the attention of the religious leaders to Jesus? Do you think he knew it would lead to persecution?

Video Questions:

1. To which of these would-be followers do you most relate? Why?
2. To which one do you least relate? Why?
3. How does it change your understanding of Biblical stories to follow the advice of Macrina Wiederkehr: "If Scripture is to become my teacher, I must put on each story like a robe to be worn, identifying with the characters, walking in their shoes, and feeling with their hearts."
4. Discuss with your group Colin's comments about John 3:17-18. How does that impact your understanding of your deep need for God's grace?
5. Katie talked about how we can be resistant to John 3:17 due to our sinful nature of exclusivity. Have you ever felt this way? What do you think causes it?
6. What do you think it means to *believe in* someone?
7. Who are some of the people in your life that you trust in? What are the characteristics of those people that make you trust them? How does this parallel your trust in God?
8. To whom is your salvation attributed? Are you ever tempted to think that you are responsible for saving yourself?

Prayer requests and other notes.