

### **John 3: 1-9**

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.<sup>[a]</sup>"

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

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Today's message is the first in what will be a 7-week series titled "On Purpose", emphasis on PURPOSE, and I will confess that when I looked at the title of this sermon weeks ago called Why Am I Here? - I **preemptively** supposed that I was going to try and help to answer that question this morning....but it turns out that doing so might be jumping the gun (taking a taxi to the finish line)...and "Why Am I Here" is a REALLY big question. One that warrants taking our time to explore - So instead today, We're going to explore the value that comes....just from **asking** the question.

I know – we all have times in our lives when we feel like we don't know where we're going. I've shared about the journey that took me from NC back to NJ in 2007, and the pain that was baked into thinking I had found my dream job only to have that flipped on its head and find myself limping back home. What I haven't shared in detail were the MONTHS that followed of looking for a job – ANY job. And then – I'll preface by saying I loved my family back then, I still love them today and I am eternally grateful for their support through the years – but having to move back into my parent's home after living independently for 7 years felt...**defeating**. In these times of uncertainty, in these times of waiting...I started to question my purpose.

Chances are, something similar has happened to all of us that caused you to feel like you didn't know where you're going...and if not yet, well it probably will someday. Maybe, like me, you thought you'd found a dream job only to see it disappear into the night or to find out you actually can't stand it...maybe there was a relationship you thought would last forever but instead it fell apart...maybe a couple dreamed of starting a big family only to learn they couldn't have children. And through trials like these, maybe questions arose:

- What is God even doing in my life?
- What's next for me?
- Why doesn't my life feel meaningful?
- What is **my** calling?
- Why am I here??

This series, over the next month and a half, is designed to help us navigate these questions...these seasons of uncertainty, seasons of doubt, and take us on a journey towards discovering our purpose.

Now, we start today with our introduction to Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus was a highly esteemed rabbi who had a favorable view of Jesus, even though he kept his admiration a secret – he was one of the Pharisees, who as a group held significant influence over what was considered RIGHT and WRONG among their fellow Jews. In fact, if you were to read to the next verse in John 3, you would find Jesus referring to Nicodemus as “Israel’s teacher”, which shows the level of esteem his fellow Jews would have held him in. Having been so impressed by the miracles he had seen Jesus perform, Nicodemus is coming to Jesus here as an authoritative religious figure to put Jesus on the spot – who are you? Are you teaching truth? Are you really a messenger from God? And yet we see that from the first sentence Jesus spoke – that Jesus flipped the script when he says “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

Nicodemus hears this and he’s like...Wait, What??...Born again??...how does someone enter their mother’s womb a second time? How can someone be BORN when they are old?

So Jesus responded by clarifying what “Born again” mean - and then in Verse 8 (The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit) – we are reminded that our relationship with the Spirit of God leads us into new possibilities for ourselves and the world around us. We sometimes think of salvation as a move from uncertainty to certainty. Yet here, Jesus is teaching Nicodemus that a life of faith is one open to constant change, reexamining, and transformation through the Holy Spirit.

Now here’s where I want to dig in this morning...we see in John’s retelling that Nicodemus wasn’t afraid to ask hard questions, but we also see that Jesus answered those questions...in a very Jesus way. But in responding the way he did, Jesus confounded Nicodemus.....who was now filled with doubt at what he was hearing in that nighttime encounter.

I want to try something quickly by asking this amazing congregation a question...and so as not to be influenced in your response by others...please close your eyes. Now with your eyes closed, I would like you to raise your hand IF you have DOUBTS about your own faith – doubts about something you feel you’re supposed to believe. Perfect – now go ahead and lower your hand if it is raised and open your eyes. **\*SHARE RESULTS\***

Adam Hamilton, a popular Methodist Pastor of 40 years that we cite often, released a Podcast episode just this past Tuesday titled “In Praise of Honest Doubt” (how fortuitous for the one putting a sermon together) and he shared that he recently conducted this same survey at his own church and the results told him that 95% of his congregation had doubts. **95%** His response to that was.....what is up with the other 5%?? What do they know, what have they experienced, that the rest of us haven’t, such that they have absolutely no doubt about their faith?!

Hamilton goes on to cite a Public Religion Research Institute survey from last year (2024), which reached 5,600 people. This survey found first that only 45% of the responders are involved in faith

communities...compare that to 75% in 2000. And when the survey dug down, it found that 67% of those who are not involved in a faith community said it 's because they stopped believing what their religion taught and the answers they received to their questions were not helpful. Some of these questions:

- Is there really a God?
- Is the Bible true and how can we know that - and why are there things in the Bible that seem incompatible with a loving God?
- Is hell real? Will all non-Christians spend eternity in hell?
- Is Heaven real?

Now this is an issue for the people surveyed that I'm sure has multiple layers, but there are in fact Christians out there, who would tell you, that doubt is entirely antithetical to faith. That you can't consider yourself a faithful follower of Christ if you have **any** doubt. In this environment, you might hear something like – "Don't ask so many questions, just accept it by faith"

But here's the thing – we are not wired to be without doubt...and God is the one who hard-wired us! God created us to be doubtful and therefore we should place great importance in emphasizing being critical thinkers...we are **meant** to ask questions.

You all shared this morning that you have doubts - Do you know who else has doubts? I do...the one privileged to be sharing a message of faith this morning has doubts and questions. So does Pastor Gina...and Pastor Jess... (I asked!) and I'm sure, others before them. In fact, doubt is present throughout the Bible, including from this stellar, faithful, religious leader Nicodemus in our scripture this morning.

So if someone says faith is the absence of doubt, that doesn't make sense to me. Instead, to me faith is not the absence of doubt...faith is the means to overcome doubt. Logically, if we didn't have doubts, if God gave us infinite proof, we wouldn't need faith...the triumph of my faith is NOT that I don't have any doubts, it's that despite the fact that I do, in the recesses of my heart I trust God anyway!

Doubt can be a dead end. A problem in a lot of churches is that people are waiting for the doubt to disappear, because they think, or they are being taught, that unabashed certainty is a prerequisite to being loved by God...and that probably explains why 67% of the people from the PRRI survey said they stopped believing what their religion taught them and gave up on it. But doubt, can also be a door. You see, a willingness to ask the types of questions I shared earlier can open us up to God's purpose for our lives as long as we desire to continue stepping forward in faith, continue to be open to what God is showing us, to accept that the path we thought was right may not be. And in doing so, we will start to see that doubt is actually evidence of growth.

Another important point we can draw from this morning's scripture...Nicodemus comes to find Jesus at night. I believe night is symbolic in this text, I believe it represents periods of darkness, uncertainty,

and unknowing for all of us. Nicodemus' conversation in this setting shows us that Jesus meets us in dark places and lights our path to find clarity. A lot of the time, our greatest growth happens in the dark, in the seasons of our life where we don't know what's coming next but have the confidence to trust in Jesus...especially when we cross the valley and can look back to see what he was telling us all along.

And yet, while we are actually living in these periods of darkness, a real struggle for many of us is admitting or confessing to ourselves that we don't actually know where we're going. We might even feel embarrassed by this.

Lord knows, I can be a stubborn person. I've definitely had seasons of struggle where I wanted to believe that I was capable of lighting the pathway for myself without relying on others. But I've also learned that's not how life works. Nicodemus is modeling for us how asking questions in the face of uncertainty is truly central to our relationship with God. By **acknowledging** what we don't know or need help figuring out, we are opening ourselves to God's grace, answers, and discovery. Nicodemus knows what "birth" means and so he has a difficult time understanding anything beyond what he already knows – so to hear Jesus say one must be "born again"...was challenging. And so Nicodemus – in Verse 9 – says "**HOW** can this be?" How....**HOW?**

Do you know who else asked this question? We talked about her a lot last month...In Luke Chapter 1 Verse 34, after an Angel of the Lord told Mary "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus"...well then of course, Mary responded as follows: PRAISE THE LORD AND GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST AND YOUR WORDS TO ME ARE LIKE DROPS OF ASSURANCE!

**NO.** Mary asked "**HOW** can this be, since I am a virgin." Mary knew how pregnancy worked and it wasn't like this.

The first response, the instinctive response for Mary and for Nicodemus was not...**YES, LORD!** It was **HOW?** If not having doubt **was** a prerequisite for finding favor with God, then the Christ story as we know it could not have been.

And therefore, an important lesson for us as we consider these two is that sometimes we need to hold loosely what we think we know so that we can embrace new understanding or direction that God is providing.

As I've grown in my faith over the years and walked the path I thought I was supposed to travel, sometimes what I've encountered reinforced what I'd already come to believe and other times I've been challenged to consider things differently. It's so important to be open to those challenges – because what if God is trying to show us something new?!

At the end of the day, faith is trusting God even in the face of great doubt. Yes, I have doubts...but I CHOOSE to believe, I CHOOSE to have faith. Friends, it IS a choice! And if I think about why I choose to believe...

- I believe in God because I've seen the amazing things he's done in my life
- I believe in God because I find peace and strength when I go to Him in prayer
- I believe in God because when I am here in worship with all of you I can feel the Holy Spirit move
- I believe in God because I'm a better husband and a better dad when I make that choice
- I believe in God because He's given me the confidence to take a leap of faith as I've stepped away from a career I'd known for 17 years to go further into ministry
- I believe in God because He's pushed me to know people before I judge them
- I believe in God because He's put me in the position to help others
- I believe in God because I believe in all the good that comes from it – that God will walk with me, will comfort me, and will guide me
- I believe in God because Jesus so perfectly pointed us to who God is

If ours is meant to be an examined faith, then we should not be afraid to doubt or ask questions. Doubt means we're paying attention – but we must always remember our verdict, if we choose to accept it: God is with us – God is for us – We are highly favored – We are loved – We have a purpose!

It's OK and it's expected that you might be asking yourself – Why am I here? – but I encourage you to believe that there **IS** a reason and to trust that God that will lead you there...even if you don't receive all your answers before the Eagles kick-off this afternoon...and know that with all the reasons I just shared as to why I believe in God, I also believe He has a plan for each and every one of us.

I talked about How questions, including the one from Nicodemus in our scripture this morning. I'll share that the biggest HOW questions I have are:

- How can I be forgiven knowing all the things in my past and all the things in my present too?
- How could this man giving his life on a cross really be the salvation for the world and be the person who lights a pathway to heaven for me?

I can't indisputably answer those questions....but I **believe** those things are true. Friends, if you are struggling with doubts and questions in this season of your life – if you are feeling lost or in the dark – if you are contemplating the direction of your life...then I encourage you to use this doubt as a reason to **dig deeper** using the gifts you've been given, including a brain that overflows with intellect. Write a journal entry outlining where you need direction and then go to God and ask for clarity, find a prayer warrior like Betsy Heinz, Tom Kulp, Elite Law, Pastor Gina or myself and ask to pray over these doubts together, and open yourself to the possibility that God is calling you in a direction you wouldn't have otherwise believed was possible....this my friends, is faith.

Amen and Amen.