

Life in the Kingdom – John 3:1-15

Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis

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I. INTRODUCTION

It was a cool summer day in Port Alsworth, Alaska, on August 26th, 1976. A slight breeze was blowing, it was mostly cloudy, and I had cabin fever. I was 4 ½ years old and about to make a memory that would never leave me for the rest of my life. At 6:45 am that same morning, my mom had awoken to some strange sounds outside our cabin and looked out the window to see a mama bear with two cubs rooting around out by our cook shack. A little later the bears must have wandered down the beach by our neighbor's cabin because their dog got really excited and broke his chain. They didn't see the bears but figured that must have been what happened.

So needless to say, my mom was reluctant to let us go outside and play. But the cabin fever and constant requests from 5 kids must have finally broken her down. In the late afternoon she finally relented, but said we needed to stay close to the house. My sister, Jenny, and her friend, Connie, decided to play on the swing set, but I was in the mood to pick some cranberries. So I got my pail and headed over to a good patch of cranberries under some trees about 20 feet from the house, right next to the beach of Lake Clark.

But as I began picking berries, I kept hearing strange noises...kind of like a stirring in the bushes or branches being moved. Every time I would hear the noises I would look all around, but could never see anything unusual. This happened multiple times, but every time after looking all around I concluded it must just be the wind. Something was out there I couldn't see with my eyes, but I could hear the effects of it. Wind was all I could come up with. What I soon discovered, however, is that I had reached a very wrong conclusion about what it was.

As I kept picking berries and hearing the noises and looking all around over and over, I finally got tired of it and thought: "That's it. I'm just being paranoid because of all the bear talk. It's just the wind and I'm going to stop looking around every time I hear it." So I just focused on filling up my pail with

cranberries and started ignoring all the strange noises. But then, there came a noise that wasn't as easy to ignore. The wind wasn't blowing hard enough to snap a branch! I turned around to see a mother bear standing on her hind legs about 4 feet away from me. I let out an ear-splitting scream that quickly got my sister and her friend screaming as well and brought my mom running out to the front porch. That was the moment my running career began.

This is how my mom described what happened from there in a letter she wrote to my grandparents:

“The kids all made it to the front porch screaming at the top of their lungs while the mama bear stood in the path to the clothesline about 20 feet from the house with the cubs up a tree beside her. She was standing right where Joe had been picking berries. Joe held his arm out beside himself and said, ‘She was right here.’ The bears ran off after all the screaming and haven't been back – they were probably more scared than we were – but my knees still get weak when I think about it!”

Just because we can't see something with our eyes doesn't mean it's not there and we would do well to pay attention to the signs, before mama bear shows up and what is unseen is revealed. You see, those sounds I was hearing were not the wind, but two bear cubs right above my head in the tree right next to where I was picking berries. I had looked all around, but I never looked up. And but for the grace of God, my life story could have ended at age 4 ½ in the Alaskan bush. Because it's never wise to get between a mama bear and her cubs.

Turn with me in your Bibles to John chapter 3 this morning. We're going to be looking at a very familiar passage today, but one which I hope will be seen with a fresh perspective when we're done. Lord willing, we'll be studying chapter 3 in two parts, this week and next. We'll do verses 1 through 15 this week, and then finish it up with the jam-packed verses 16 through 21 next week. We're picking up the life story of Jesus soon after he had humiliated the Pharisees by dramatically and forcefully cleansing God's temple of the cattle, sheep and doves being sold in the temple courts. And today, we find one of those Pharisees seeking Jesus out for a private conversation that turned into a conversation about the only way to see the unseen.

II. ENTERING GOD'S KINGDOM (Verses 1 to 8)

Let's begin with verses 1 through 8, which I've labeled in your sermon notes:

Entering God's Kingdom:

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water AND the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

This is really a remarkable event recorded for us in Scripture. To think that Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court or ruling council of 70 priests, scribes and lay elders – to think that even after his humiliation in the temple, he would still seek Jesus out for a private conversation, is pretty amazing. And his purpose was not to say, "How dare you," but instead to seek out the truth and learn from him. And even more amazing is the fact that he and evidently some other Pharisees knew in their hearts that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God. There was no other explanation for the miraculous signs he had been performing during the Passover Feast. No one could do these things apart from the power of God. So Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, putting aside the humiliation he had experienced and seeking to understand what Jesus was all about and what God was doing through him.

Notice that Nicodemus didn't ask a question in his opening statement to Jesus. He just expressed that he and others knew Jesus was a teacher come from God because of the signs he was performing. But Jesus, in responding to what Nicodemus said, indicated there was something much bigger going on than meets the eye. And before telling Nicodemus about it, he used what has been called

“the double amen:” ***Truly, truly, I say to you.*** Jesus actually uses this phrase 3 times during his conversation with Nicodemus. The intention is to strongly emphasize the absolute truth of what he’s telling Nicodemus.

What Jesus wanted Nicodemus to realize is that these miraculous signs Jesus was performing were evidence of an invisible kingdom...what Jesus called the kingdom of God...An invisible kingdom not seen or understood by the world. The signs Jesus was performing were like the strange noises I was hearing as I picked berries, indicating something was there that I couldn’t see with my eyes. You see, Jesus was operating in the invisible kingdom of God, under his rule and filled with his power, and he was inviting Nicodemus and all people to see and enter that kingdom with him – connected with the Living God, filled with his power, and living in step with him.

Theologian George Ladd describes the kingdom of God this way:

“The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and...the sphere in which [that] rule is experienced... They are the people of God’s rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it (*Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem).”

But as Jesus told Nicodemus about this kingdom of God of which his signs were evidence, he said there’s only one way to even see this kingdom: a person has to be born again. ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*** This kingdom of God is invisible to those who have not been born again.

Well, Nicodemus went literal and physical on Jesus and he responded: *How can an old man get back in his mother’s womb and be born again?* In other words, how then will I or anybody for that matter ever be able to see the kingdom of God? Jesus then went on to clarify for Nicodemus what he meant by being born again. And again using “the double amen” to emphasize the truth of what he was about to say, he told Nicodemus: ***“...unless one is born of water AND the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.***

Previously Jesus had spoken of SEEING the kingdom of God, now he spoke of ENTERING the kingdom of God. In other words, there's a way to not only see this kingdom that's invisible to the rest of the world, but there's also a way to enter that kingdom...to live, like Jesus, in that kingdom where God rules and guides and empowers, and, as we'll see, shares his eternal life.

And, just as there's only way to see the kingdom of God, there's also only one way to enter the kingdom of God: *by being born of the Spirit*. God's Holy Spirit needs to bring spiritual re-birth within physically alive people in order for them to enter the kingdom of God. All people have been born of water, born of the flesh, born physically. But physical birth alone does not enable us to enter God's kingdom. We need God to open our eyes and do his work within us. Scripture tells us we're all born spiritually dead because of sin and we need an awakening by God himself. We need to be re-born spiritually by the power of God's Spirit. And this is what Jesus was trying to communicate to Nicodemus, the Pharisee.

You see Jesus had come to bring the kingdom of God with power in a new way that had been spoken of in the Old Testament. By being spiritually reborn, people would be able to see and enter God's kingdom...at peace with God, filled with the power of his Spirit, and able to serve him and accomplish his will. This had been spoken of in Ezekiel 36, verses 25 to 27, where God had said through his prophet:

25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

What I believe Jesus was communicating was something like this: *Nicodemus, the time has come. Things are changing. As you see the power of God operating in me, realize the kingdom of God is here with power, and God is inviting you to both see and enter it...But the only way to do that is through spiritual rebirth by the power of God's Spirit...You can't see or enter God's kingdom apart from God's work. But when he does his work within you, he'll give you new heart, bring you into his kingdom and fill you with the power of his Spirit...He'll show you how to*

leave behind the ritual and legalism and hypocrisy of the Pharisees to a new life of Holy Spirit empowered obedience and accomplishing of my will for my glory.

And to further help Nicodemus understand what it meant to be born again by the Spirit and that he was not talking about physical re-birth, Jesus used the wind as an illustration. Being re-born by the Spirit is not something that can be seen with the eyes, it is a spiritual re-birth. But though it can't be seen with the eyes, there will be evidence that it really has happened...things will start to change in people's lives as they begin to desire God, practice his Word and experience the transforming power of his Spirit. Just as I can know there's been a wind storm when I come home and see branches all over my yard, so there will be evidence that God's at work in those who have been born of the Spirit and have entered life in God's kingdom. Just as the sound of those bear cubs in the tree above me was telling me something was there, so there will be indicators that God's Spirit is at work in the lives of those who have been born of him.

III. RECEIVING GOD'S TESTIMONY (Verses 9 to 13)

Well, despite Jesus' explanation and illustration, Nicodemus was still confused and he still didn't know how to become born of the Spirit. Let's move on to verses 9 to 13, which I've labeled: *Receiving God's Testimony*:

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

What we have here is a confused teacher. Nicodemus as a Pharisee would have been considered an authority on the Jewish Scriptures and responsible for teaching God's truths to the people of Israel. And though he had already acknowledged that he knew Jesus was a teacher from God, Nicodemus the teacher was having a hard time being taught. This born again of the Spirit idea and the invisible kingdom of God were either still not making sense or were just too much for him to swallow.

But Jesus knew what the problem was and he put his finger right on it. The reason why Nicodemus was struggling to understand what Jesus was sharing with him was really a matter of unbelief. It was that problem we all have of doubting, rationalizing, and ignoring the clear Word of God and all the various ways he's constantly communicating it to us. It's not that it's so hard to understand, it's that we think we know better and we have other plans and surrendered acceptance and belief seems too costly and risky. Jesus diagnosed the "understanding" problem as this: **"...you do not receive our testimony."**

Isn't it interesting that in verse 11 Jesus begins using plural pronouns here: *we* and *our*? Up to this point he's been saying: *I say to you*. But now, using "the double amen" again, he switches to: **"...WE speak of what WE know, and bear witness to what WE have seen..."** Is he talking about himself and the disciples or about himself and those who have believed in him? Well, I think the New King James Version gets this one right. It capitalizes these pronouns, indicating that Jesus is speaking about the 3 persons of the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is confirmed by other passages in the Gospels where Jesus speaks of the Father and the Spirit bearing witness about him.

There are two primary truths emphasized here by Jesus. First, the Triune God is constantly bearing witness and testifying and communicating to the world who he is, how to live in relationship with him, and the true nature of reality. He wants people to know him and he has made and is making every effort to reveal himself to them and teach them what's true and how they can live connected with him in his kingdom. He does this in so many ways: through creation itself which shouts design and the glory of God, through our consciences and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, through his written Word, through the life and teachings and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ himself, and through his church made up of people born again of the Spirit and accomplishing his purposes by his power. There's no shortage of truth in the world about who God is and how to live connected with him in his kingdom. But there is a shortage of people willing to receive, believe and surrender to what God has shared.

The second truth emphasized here by Jesus is that there is no one other than the Triune God who is qualified to explain ultimate truth and reality. God the Father, Son and Spirit are speaking from firsthand experience – things they know to be true and have seen and experienced firsthand. All human teachers and witnesses

heavenly things, since he came from there. I can just imagine that Nicodemus' head was spinning by now. And Jesus was just getting started! Next week we'll hear what other amazing things Jesus told Nicodemus about the Son of Man.

IV. BELIEVING FOR ETERNAL LIFE (Verses 14 to 15)

But let's look at our final 2 verses for today, verses 14 and 15, where Jesus speaks a prophetic word about his future and what he had come to accomplish. After introducing the Son of Man in verse 13, Jesus says this about him:

14 And 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.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness...this was a moment from Israel's history that Nicodemus would absolutely have known all about from that simple phrase. Back in the book of Numbers, chapter 21, verses 4 through 9, the people of Israel had been wandering in the wilderness and grew impatient and spoke against both God and Moses, accusing them of bringing them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness and telling them they hated the worthless food God had been miraculously providing them all the way. In other words they sinned greatly against the Lord who was guiding and sustaining them and for providing for their needs. As a result God sent a judgment of poisonous snakes that started biting and killing many of the people.

In the face of this terrible judgment the people admitted their sin and asked Moses to pray to the Lord to take away the snakes. But the solution the Lord provided was this: Moses was to make a bronze snake and raise it up on a pole. Whenever anyone was bitten by a snake, if they would look up to the bronze serpent they would live. This also means that if they refused to look at the bronze serpent, they would die. So now Jesus is pointing Nicodemus back to that day of judgment for sin and the salvation that was found only by looking to the bronze snake on a pole. Just as Moses lifted up that snake and it brought life to those who looked to it, so the Son of Man would also be lifted up so that everyone who looks to him and believes in him will have eternal life. Believing in Jesus and his work on the cross would be the key to possessing God's eternal life.

Of course we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that Nicodemus suddenly got a vision of Jesus on the cross and understood exactly what was going to happen. This is more like the first markings on a beautiful painting, little by little hinting at what that final painting is going to be about. But as we examine what Jesus said from hindsight, having the benefit of the complete picture of what Jesus eventually endured for us on the cross, we see some profound significance in connecting it to the bronze snake in the wilderness. The poisonous snakes were the judgment due for the sin of the people. In raising a bronze snake up on the pole then, Moses was putting the judgment for their sin on that pole, which of course pointed to the cross. To be released from that judgment, people would have to lift their eyes and gaze upon the judgment for sin on that pole.

And that's because the judgment for sin would be one day be taken care of forever by Jesus, the Son of Man, who would also be lifted up on a cross instead of a pole, bearing God's wrath for sin, paying the penalty for it, and bringing eternal life to those who will simply look to him in that place where he took the judgment we deserved...believing in him and trusting in his work on the cross and his resurrection...letting him take the judgement for our sin, instead of bearing it ourselves... and entering life in the kingdom of God, born again by the Spirit and finally able to see and operate under the rule and in the power of Almighty God, our Creator.

V. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

I want you to think back for a moment to my encounter with the bears at 4 ½ years old. It has some interesting parallels to what we've talked about today. There was an unseen reality going on all around me while I picked cranberries by the lake. Oh I'd heard that there was a mother bear with cubs around, but I hadn't seen them with my own eyes. My mom had told me about them, the neighbors had testified, there were signs that they'd been around. And as I picked berries, there were more signs that something was out there. But because I couldn't see what it was and because I never thought to look above me, I was blinded. I started ignoring the signs and just kept going about my business.

The reality was that there were two bear cubs right above my head making noises to tell me something was there, and that within moments mama was about to show up to claim her cubs. Had I continued to ignore the signs and refused to

look around one more time when something sounded different, mama may have found an easy meal for her cubs or cleared me out of the way with a bear claw and some sharp teeth. Or what if I decided to try and scare her off or fight her instead of run to safety? A 4 ½ year old against a mother trying to get to her cubs wouldn't have gone well, would it?!

I think of those two bear cubs as the true reality that I can't see with my eyes. There were lots of signs that those cubs were there, but I was looking in all the wrong places for explanations. Similarly, God has given us so many signs and is testifying continually about true reality...that he's real, that he's source of life and all we see, that sin is real and has deadly consequences, that belief in Jesus is the one way to be free of sin and its penalty, and that if we do nothing, mama bear's coming to claim her cubs. All he asks us to do is receive and believe his testimony...acknowledging our sin and our need for him and crying out to Jesus for new birth by his Spirit so we can enter his kingdom and beginning living eternal life there.

You see people are so quick to receive the testimony of men and any explanation of the universe that doesn't involve looking up to God. But listen to what the Apostle John says in 1 John 5, verses 9 to 12:

9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. 10 Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. 11 And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

God's testimony is so simple, so clear: Just look up...look up to the cross of Jesus Christ and believe. Cry out to God for the ability to acknowledge your sin and believe in Jesus for salvation. You'll be born of the Spirit and enter eternal life in relationship with God in his kingdom.

And for those of us who've already been born again through faith in Christ, let's not forget that life in God's kingdom is not business as usual. It's not just forgiveness and then living life just like we did before. Life in God's kingdom is meant to take on the character and priorities and power of the life of Jesus Christ. We're invited to continue receiving all of God's testimony in his Word and putting it into practice by the power of the One who gave us new spiritual life and now lives inside of us...the Holy Spirit. Life in God's kingdom is a transformed life where people are meant to see even more evidence and signs and testimony through us that God is alive and well and Jesus is the only way of salvation. Let's live under God's rule in his kingdom in such a way that other "hear the sound" of his work in us and have their eyes opened to see the truth!