

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

John 3:1-17

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Year A - Lent 2, Text: John 3:1-17
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This passage describes Jesus speaking with Nicodemus about the need for “new birth from above.” It is the first of John’s “discourse narratives.” There is a shift from dialogue in v. 1–10, to monologue in v. 11–15.

Verse 3:1: Nicodemus was “a leader of the Jews,” most likely a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin (Council). He is mentioned only in John (see also 7:45–52, 19:38–42). As a Pharisee, he was a student of Scripture. Although not all Pharisees were teachers, in 3:10 Jesus refers to him as a teacher.

Verse 3:2: Some suggest that he came to Jesus at night because he did not want any of his colleagues to know that he was meeting with Jesus. Others point out that in John’s Gospel, there has as yet been no major clash between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. Still others point out that, at that time, rabbis devoted themselves to the serious study of Scripture during evening hours. After all, the Pharisees were laypeople whose jobs kept them busy during the day. Whatever the case, Nicodemus comes to Jesus to talk theology. He addresses Jesus as “Rabbi,” but grants that He has some special authority from God since His teaching is accompanied with special signs.

Verse 3:3: Jesus responds to Nicodemus’ comments by stating that no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above (born: see John 1:13). The Greek adverb *from above* (*anothen*) can also mean *again*. Jesus here means “from above,” but Nicodemus misunderstands it as again. His misunderstanding opens the door for further instruction. In responding, Jesus does not speak about the Law (Torah, Genesis through Deuteronomy) or His own person (at least, not immediately). He points to the great gift that He brings: the new birth that is the only way of entering God’s Kingdom.

Verse 3:4: Nicodemus completely misunderstands the term “from above.” How can physical birth be repeat-

ed? How can a person crawl back into his mother’s womb? The idea seems ridiculous to Nicodemus.

Verse 3:5: However, human misunderstanding gives Jesus the opportunity to reveal the truth, which He introduces with the formula “Very truly” (see also 1:51; 3:11). The new birth is not a physical event, even though it begins with a washing with water. Rather, it is a rebirth by the power of the Spirit — the Spirit who, as John the Baptist had prophesied, would carry out His work when the Messiah appeared on the stage of history.

Verse 3:6: Man as flesh has a human origin; he cannot change himself. Only the Holy Spirit can create new life. Thus, “to be born anew” means to be born from above *by an act of God*, to become part of God’s new world and God’s new humanity.

Verse 3:7: Jesus tells Nicodemus not to be astonished by the profound truths that He is revealing to and sharing with him.

Verse 3:8: The Greek word for Spirit (*pneuma*) can also mean *wind* or *breath*. Jesus points to the wind in the treetops to show how powerless man is over the movement of the Spirit. We can see the wind and the Spirit at work, but we cannot dictate which way the wind should blow or how the Spirit should work.

Verses 3:9-10: Nicodemus is puzzled by what Jesus is sharing with him. Though he is a teacher in Israel, Nicodemus will not understand what Jesus is sharing with him until he finally grasps Who Jesus really is.

Verses 3:11-13: Jesus can speak of heavenly things only because He is from above and has the Spirit in full measure (see also 3:31–34). Once again, we find a clear promise of Jesus’ coming resurrection and ascension. The ascension to the Father will be the final sign that Jesus is the Son of Man who has come from heaven to earth to be the Savior of God’s people.

Verse 3:14: But Jesus must first be “lifted up” on a cross. The Israelites once looked up at the brass serpent that Moses’ erected in the wilderness and were saved from snake bite (Numbers 21:9). However, when Jesus has been raised up on a cross between heaven and earth, people will be able to look to Him in faith and be saved from more than snake venom. Moses simply raised a brass serpent upon a pole. Here the term “lifted up” has to do with glorification. Jesus, exalted to glory at His cross and resurrection, represents healing for all.

Verse 3:15: God’s people are saved from a sinful life in a sinful world so that they might live as brothers and sisters of their forgiving Savior and Servant Lord. Jesus is with us both in the present world and finally in Jesus’ eternal presence in the world to come. The term eternal life is used here for the first time in John. The focus is on transformation of life. God calls us to live now as we shall then.

Verse 3:16: There is probably no better-known or frequently quoted verse in the Bible than John 3:16. It gives us a full, yet beautifully simple statement of the Gospel of salvation. Those who grasp its meaning grasp God’s truth.

It all goes back to the love of God for the world that He created. The world fell into sin, but God never gave up His love for fallen, sinful humanity. God does not act like an offended lover who reacts in anger when rejected or spurned. Never! He continues to love, and He acts to win back what He loves. A sinful world is won back, not by threats, but by God’s supreme act of love, the sacrifice of His own dear Son; see also Romans 5:8.

Faith in Jesus means two things: recognizing Him as both Son of God and Savior from sin. These two aspects cannot be separated, for only God’s Son could remove the guilt of sinners and give an eternal life that cannot be destroyed by physical death and the grave.

Verse 3:17: The Greek root for *condemn* means both judgment and condemnation. However, Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. He came as humanity’s Savior so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life. Even so, some condemn themselves by turning away from God’s light.