

## SERMON NOTES

Green Sunday

Synaxis Gospel  
John 2:23-3:12

### THE NEW BIRTH

#### INTRODUCTION

Our Synaxis readings continue our focus on the deep theological teachings of our Lord. During His ministry prior to the Crucifixion, He taught much that the disciples at that time were unable to understand. It was only after the Resurrection, and during the forty days He remained on the earth before His Ascension, that they were finally able to comprehend what they had seen and heard earlier. It was during this forty-day period that he also taught them how the Scriptures (our Old Testament) spoke of Him and His salvation. However, in our reading for today, we will look again with the Disciple John at an incident that occurred sometime during the three-year ministry. In this episode our Lord taught an inquiring religious leader the very essence of the Gospel.

The religious leader's name was Nicodemus. The other Gospel writers do not mention Nicodemus; but from John, we know something about this man. He was a Pharisee, and he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews.<sup>1</sup> At one point, he attempted to defend Jesus' rights before the Sanhedrin, but was ridiculed by the others.<sup>2</sup> He became a secret disciple of our Lord, and finally threw all caution to the winds when he assisted another secret disciple (who was also from the rulers), Joseph of Arimathea, to bury the crucified body of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Before we study the night-time meeting of our Lord and Nicodemus, our reading sets the stage for us with a few introductory comments about what seems to be the probable time and place.

#### SYNAXIS READING

John 2:23-3:12

*Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.*

*But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.*

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:1

<sup>2</sup> John 7:49

<sup>3</sup> John 19:39

*Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."*

*Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

*Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"*

*Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*

*"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

*"Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'*

*"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

*Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"*

*Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?"*

*Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness.*

*If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"*

## NOTES

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.

The Passover was the great yearly feast in Jerusalem, commanded by God to commemorate the saving of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery around 1440 BC. Every male was required to be at this feast unless he was unable to attend. A lamb was sacrificed for each family or group, as a symbol of the lambs that had been slain in Egypt, and whose blood, smeared on the door of a home, caused the

death angel to *pass over it*. This ancient event pointed to the greater salvation of the Cross. The blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the Cross for us, saves us from eternal death.

Jesus, as a Law abiding male Jew, went to the Passover celebrations during His years on earth. John records three Passovers during Jesus' ministry; this is the first. The second was around the time of the Feeding of the Five-thousand. The last, was the day He was crucified.

This first Passover that John records is early in Jesus' ministry, probably the same year that He was baptized by John the Baptist. This Passover occurred shortly after the miracle of turning the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. A few verses earlier, John tells how just before this Passover, Jesus had entered Jerusalem, and upon seeing a market operating in the prayer place of the Gentiles, He had angrily driven the merchants out. This act had amazed the people and angered the religious rulers. However, Jesus' miracles were attracting a lot of attention and many were recognizing the signs of the promised Messianic King in His deeds. This is probably what is meant by 'many believed in His name.

The term *name* is used for *reputation, character,* and the essence of who one is.

**But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.**

Jesus knew that the faith the people were exhibiting was not the right kind of faith yet. They did not understand enough to have real faith. Many would turn away later. Some would later try to force Him to be an earthly political king. He knew this, so He was on His guard.

Being God, Jesus was able to look into the hearts of these *believers* and knew they were not trustworthy.<sup>4</sup>

**Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;**

Nicodemus is only mentioned in John. He later became a secret disciple and helped bury His body.

A Pharisee was one of the three prominent religious sects mentioned by the historian, Josephus. They rigorously upheld the Law of Moses and were known to be experts capable of teaching the finer points of the Law and their own supplements to it.

As a ruler of the Jews, Josephus was a member of the Sanhedrin—the ruling council of the Jews. At one point he attempted to defend Jesus' rights before the Sanhedrin, but was ridiculed by the others.

**this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”**

He came by night so that the meeting might be in secret. Apparently, he did not want his interest in Jesus to be known to the other rulers.

The term, Rabbi, which means *great one* or *teacher*, was used by Nicodemus as a sign of respect. Although according to John 7:15, Jesus never attended any of the rabbinical schools, it was obvious that Jesus was a great teacher.

The use of “We know,” might mean that Nicodemus knew of others of the rulers who believed that God sent Jesus. However, Nicodemus does not say who those others are. One, at least, was Joseph of Arimathea, who buried our Lord's body in his own new tomb

A man, blind from birth, later pointed out to the Sanhedrin this same obvious fact: no one could do the miracles that Jesus did, unless God was with Him.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:24; 15:8

Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Jesus, Who knew what was in Nicodemus’ heart, went straight to his unasked question. “How does one enter the Kingdom of God?”

Jesus’ answer is totally unexpected. A person needs a second birth to enter the Kingdom of God.

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”

Nicodemus thinks of physical birth. Of course this would be impossible.

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

What this term *water* means has several interpretations.

- 1) Some believe that Jesus is referring to water baptism. However, we know, from the experience of the thief crucified along with Jesus, that water baptism was not necessary for him. Jesus promised him, on the basis of his declaration of faith, that he would, that very day, be with Jesus in Paradise.

If water baptism is what is referred to, then it may be an indirect reference to repentance, which is a requirement of water baptism. John the Baptist’s baptism with water was a “baptism of repentance.”<sup>6</sup> It was an outward symbol of an inner condition of repentance and commitment to God’s service. The thief obviously repented. The Creed of the Armenian Church is the **only** form of the Nicene Creed that links repentance with the one baptism.

Moreover, the King of the kingdom was baptized with water (although in His case it was a sign of His commitment, since He needed no repentance) and John the Baptist saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Him at that time.<sup>7</sup> Combining this event with “you must be born again” has led some theologians to teach that Jesus was born again, spiritually, at His baptism. We do not hold this teaching, because we know that God became incarnate in Mary’s womb. There was no need, therefore, for Jesus to have a spiritual birth.

John 1:33 may possibly see both water (with its symbolism of repentance and commitment) and Spirit baptisms as commanded by God. In Acts 10:47, the baptism of the Holy Spirit preceded water baptism, yet they still baptized the recipients with water. Possibly, this later baptism was done as a declaration of their repentance, faith, and commitment to Jesus Christ.

- 2) Some believe that *water* refers to the Holy Spirit. In all other places in John, when *water* is used in a spiritual sense, the Holy Spirit is meant. In John 7:39, Jesus says that He will give those trusting in Him “Living Water.” John tells us that He was referring to the Holy Spirit that would be given at Pentecost. This is also what Jesus meant when He told the woman at the well, in John 4, that He would give her enduring *water*.

In 1 John 5:6, the Apostle was combating the Gnostic belief that Jesus was not really physical but was only a spirit being. “This is he that came by **water** and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by **water** only, but by **water** and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears

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<sup>5</sup> John 9:30-33

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:11

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 3:16

witness, because the Spirit is the truth.” There he uses ‘water’ for ‘spirit.’ ‘The blood’ stands for the physical body. Jesus came by ‘water’ and the ‘blood.’ He was both physical and spirit.

However, since the Spirit is listed next as a requirement, it seems redundant for ‘water’ to mean the same thing.

- 3) Some believe that ‘water’ refers to the Word of God, or the Scriptures. Ephesians 5:26 uses ‘water’ in this way. Christ washes His Church with the word of God.
- 4) Some believe that ‘water’ refers to physical birth. The following statement by Christ, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,” seems to differentiate between physical birth and spiritual birth.

Moreover, John has patterned his Gospel after Genesis. There, all things physical came from the primordial waters. Man was first made a physical being from what was, in the beginning, only water. Afterwards, Adam became a living soul when God breathed His life into him. So, the first man, in his un-fallen state, was a combination of that which came from water and that which came from God’s Spirit. The physical birth of a child is from the waters of its mother’s womb. Because of sin, the child needs the Spirit to become a living soul, such as Adam was at his creation.

If this option is correct, it is the only instance in which John uses ‘water’ in this way. This is the only instance, unless one sees the creation of wine from water as a metaphor of the Creator, once again, bringing forth life (wine is considered a living substance) from water.

Given these options, it seems the best may be a reference to repentance, symbolized by water baptism. Choosing this option does not mean that the water itself is effective; rather that the repentance of the person, the turning back to God in real commitment to His will is effective, and is symbolized by the water baptism. God will follow such an act of repentance and commitment with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Thus a new child is born into God’s kingdom and family.

**”That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.**

Here, Jesus contrasts the physical birth Nicodemus had in mind with the spiritual birth required to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Physical birth has its source in the physical, whereas spiritual birth has its source in the Holy Spirit.

**“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’**

Nicodemus was flabbergasted. He could not understand this concept. If Jesus had spoken of good works or of obeying the Law as a requirement for the kingdom, he would have understood. But a spiritual birth was a new idea for him.

**”The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**

Jesus points out that there are other phenomena that Nicodemus does not understand at this time, yet he accepts them. For instance, the wind cannot be seen, but its effects prove it exists. With a spiritually born person, you can only see the effect. Spirit born people can be sensed by the effect in their lives of the Holy Spirit. A Force that cannot be seen directs them.

**Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”**

Nicodemus was still puzzled.

Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?”

Jesus indicates that Nicodemus is **the** teacher of his people. He should know these things. Where would Nicodemus have learned of this concept in his studies? In Ezekiel 37, there is a parable of dry bones that come to life when the Spirit breathes on their reassembled dead bodies. The bones represent sinful and exiled Israel. Yet, they are restored to the Lord by the action of the Holy Spirit. The Lord tells them, “‘And I shall put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life, and I shall place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD have spoken and done it,’ declares the LORD.”

There are historical events, recorded in the Old Testament, that demonstrate a new beginning that is different. While they show new beginnings in a physical way, they picture the new birth. Some of these are the new life of Noah after the flood and the new life of the Israelites after crossing the Red Sea. These were seen as types of baptism. But spiritual birth requires repentance and the Holy Spirit.

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen: and you do not receive our witness.

Jesus has used ‘Truly, truly’ several times during this interview. The term emphasizes the truth and seriousness of his statements. Jesus knows the truth, however, the rulers—Jesus has switched to a plural form of ‘you’—have not accepted His teachings.

If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

The new birth is an earthly experience. Only Jesus can tell of the heavenly things. Too bad Nicodemus and the others were not ready to hear of these *heavenly things*. Theologians have tried to figure out some of these things, but without the authority of Jesus’ words or those of His Apostles, how can we really know?

## APPLICATION

Into a thrilled Armenian family, a baby boy was born; his name is Daniel. This was his first birth and hopefully, someday, if we all faithfully teach Him about the love of his Creator, he will be born a second time, but not from his mother’s womb. He will be born as a member of God’s family, a citizen of God’s kingdom. The Holy Spirit will birth him, and only He can give Daniel spiritual life.

What can we do to help? As a part of our congregation we are responsible for him too. We want him to know everything that will help him make right decisions, especially when it comes to his relationship with God. Where will we start?

First of all, we will teach him that the Creator God loves him very much, and will watch over him while he is small. When he begins to be naughty, we will explain that God knows all that he does, and although God is not happy when Daniel does wrong, He still loves him. In fact, God loves Daniel so much that, long ago, He decided to become a human too, so that He could take all the punishment that Daniel deserves. He wants Daniel to live with Him forever, but that would not be possible if Daniel has to be somewhere else, paying forever for all the bad things that he does. It was for this reason that God became the baby

Jesus on that very first Christmas. We will teach Daniel to praise God with all his heart, to be happy and secure in his great and good Friend.

When Daniel is older and can understand the seriousness of sin and man's dilemma, we will explain the seriousness of God's decision to become a man, the cost to Him that He gladly paid to rescue our souls; the horror of His death on the Cross that we all deserved for our rebellion against His gracious rule. We will explain that God does not force us to accept Him or His work for us on the cross; but if we do we will receive the power to be born for the second time—this time not physically, but spiritually. Forever more, we will be God's spiritual children.

We do not understand how this happens. We are very much like the man, Nicodemus, of our reading. He did not understand all that Jesus said about spiritual birth. However, we, like Nicodemus, must know that Jesus knows, and must be trusted. (Later, Nicodemus risked everything for the sake of our Lord.) We just need to understand our part. We must believe that God became a man to die for our sins, to pay the penalty we could never pay ourselves. We need to believe God when He says that it is done. We need to add nothing more. All we need to do is come to Him, truly repenting for our sins. and then trust Him completely. He will somehow give us this new birth and the gift of His Holy Spirit to help us follow and do His will.

If we truly do this, it will mean we are committed to our Lord and King. We will risk all, just as Nicodemus did, for His sake, and for the sake of spreading the great good news of this Gospel. The Armenian Church is committed to helping us. Each Sunday we meet to relive in a sense the great work of Christ for us on the Cross. This is the Badarak. We remember once again His death for us, and in remembering, we take the Bread and the Wine, hearing the words, "This is My Body, which is given for you, this cup is the New Testament in My Blood which is shed for you." In taking these holy elements, we remember, and we commit, once again, to the service of this One Who loved us so much and gave His all for us. We are joined to Him, and to each other, as His living body ready to do His work on this earth. As St Paul instructed, we are living sacrifices, and it is reasonable that we should be.<sup>8</sup>

As Daniel grows up in the Church, we will also help him learn to understand the meaning of the Badarak. Moreover, we will help him understand that when parents baptize their little ones, they are committing to bring them to the point of so understanding the love of our Lord that they will gladly trust Him with their lives and will happily serve Him. The parents, godparents and the entire Church, eagerly look forward to the wonderful day when these precious children will be born again. But the most eager of all is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 12:1