

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 B - Holy Trinity Sunday, Text: John 3:1-17
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In John 2:1–12, we read of Jesus turning water into wine while attending a marriage celebration in Cana of Galilee. Although Jesus' action in doing this involved the miraculous, the message of His action is that He replaces Jewish purification rituals with the joy of the breaking in of the Messianic Age. After all, Jewish rabbis taught that when the Messianic Age broke in, there would be an abundance of wine; see Amos 9:13–14; Jeremiah 31:12.

In John 2:13–25, we read of Jesus going to Jerusalem “when the Passover of the Jews was near” (2:13). During His time there, Jesus attacked the Temple’s “sin management system” and its “salvation marketing system.”

The next incident in John (today’s pericope) focuses on Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus; most likely Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish council or Sanhedrin; see 7:50. Embedded in this event is the first of the Johannine discourses. Its contents shift from dialog (3:1–10) to monologue (3:11–15) to reflection by the evangelist (3:16–21). The shift from singular in Verses 1–10 to plural in v. 11 may reflect the early church’s controversy with the Jewish leaders and people.

Commentary

Verses 3:1–4: Ancient Jewish literature tells us that God showed His approval of a rabbi’s teaching by working miracles through him. Because Jesus’ miracles mean exactly that to Nicodemus, he comes to Jesus at night (in John, darkness is symbolic of evil and ignorance; note John 13:30) and greets Him as a great teacher.

Although the first disciples also recognized Jesus as a great teacher, they eventually progressed beyond that (John 1:38; 1:49; 20:28). In His dialog with Nicodemus, Jesus shows him that He is a “teacher from God” in a way that Nicodemus does not expect; Jesus has actually come from God!

Jews in Jesus’ day believed that they belonged to God

because they were genetic descendants of Abraham. Jesus pointed out to Nicodemus that to belong to God has to do with another “birth process” — being born into God’s family through God’s action. Belonging to God’s family has to do with divine grace, not human genes.

The whole discourse stresses that what is on the natural level, the level of flesh, cannot of itself reach the divine level. But in what follows, and throughout John, we discover that the “new birth” is accomplished by God descending from heaven to the human level and then returning to heaven, drawing His family of grace into eternal fellowship with Him. Hence, throughout his writing, John focuses on God’s incarnation in Jesus, and Jesus’ redemptive life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The key word in the discourse is in v. 3: “born *anōthen*.” The Greek word *anōthen* has the double meaning of “from above” and “again.” Nicodemus, thinking on a purely human level, takes the meaning to be born “again” physically — an impossibility.

Verses 3:5–6: In clarifying His message to Nicodemus, Jesus speaks of being born of water and the Spirit. Nicodemus should have understood this, for he knows that the spirit or breath given by God is responsible for natural life, and that in messianic times God would sprinkle water on people and give them a new spirit, i.e., a new form of life (see Genesis 2:7, Job 34:14, Ezekiel 36:25–26).

Naturally, Christian readers have an extended understanding of this passage and see it in the light of Holy Baptism and the Holy Spirit.)

Verses 3:7–8: When Nicodemus still does not understand, Jesus gives him another example. People believe in the wind without understanding its workings; they must do the same with the Spirit. In both Hebrew and in Greek, the same can mean both “wind” and “spirit.”

Verses 3:9–10: When Nicodemus persists with his questions, Jesus reminds him that he, Nicodemus, is supposed to be the teacher, not the pupil. He has come as a representative of the Jews saying, “We know” (v. 2). Are the “we” other members of the Jewish Sanhedrin? (See John 12:42.) He must now listen as Jesus speaks for the new faith of those who believe in and follow Him.

Verse 3:11: Jesus says, “We speak of what we know,” but the Jewish leaders whom Nicodemus represents will not accept this witness. However, if Nicodemus really wants to understand, Jesus will explain further.

Verse 3:12: If Nicodemus cannot understand the things he should have known (“earthly”), how can he hope to understand when Jesus reaches up to heaven for His explanation?

Verses 3:13–15: Jesus’ explanation involves the cycle of incarnation, death, and resurrection. Again, a two-fold meaning surfaces: the Greek word for “lift up” refers both to being lifted up on a cross and to being lifted up into heaven. It also suggests exaltation. In Jesus’ return to His Father in heaven, the cross is the first step in the ladder of the ascension. Only when Jesus is raised up can the Spirit, of which Jesus has spoken to Nicodemus be given (John 7:39).

In **Verses 3:14–15**, John makes reference to Moses’ bronze serpent as an example of healing and restoration to wholeness coming through something “raised up” (Numbers 21:9). However, Moses simply mounted a serpent on a pole — a symbol that people were to look up to. Here, John substitutes a verb that implies glorification. Jesus, exalted to glory at His cross and resurrection, represents ultimate healing and restoration to wholeness for all who look up to Him.

Verses 3:16–17: The dialogue has now become a monologue. Nicodemus possibly slipped off into the night from which he had come, his eyes open later (see 19:38, 42.) The focus is on the significance of Jesus’ incarnation. To say that God “gave” implies *gave up to death* or *sacrificed* His only Son to gain this new life for humanity. The mission of Jesus is not about condemnation, but salvation.