



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

One of my favorite things to do around here is to host a kind of monthly open house for those who are new to Christchurch Cranbrook. And over the years I have noticed that the vast majority of those who come are not just new to this church, but they are new to the Episcopal church altogether. And I'm not so sure we always appreciate this because in addition to Episcopalians, right out there next to you guys in the pews, we are Methodists, we are Lutherans, we are Presbyterian, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Latter Day Saints, Evangelical, Baptist, non-denominational, people that go to those big box churches with giant fog machines, you name it. We are all here.

And what I do when people gather is I start off by asking what brought you here and perhaps more importantly, what's kept you coming back? And you can just kind of imagine your own answers to those questions to imagine the variety of responses I hear. But there's one that gets named more than any, and that is our welcome of all and our inclusion of all, no conditions, no exceptions. And it gets expressed a variety of ways. One of which is, I'm looking for a church where it's safe to ask questions and where it's okay to have some doubt.

And that was a huge one for me as well when I first discovered the Episcopal Church. I'd always been something of a spiritual seeker, going back to my years in high school and college. Growing up, my family wasn't religious at all. We were never part of any church. But that didn't keep me from grappling with the big questions of life. You know, what's it all about? Who am I? What's my purpose? How do I fit into all of this? Right? All those conversations of late night dorm rooms. And I really relished these conversations and I enjoyed hearing all the burgeoning philosophies that my fellow students had, and I would engage with anyone.

I even tried talking with some of the Christian groups on campus, Campus Crusade, I believe they were called, but I could never get very far with those guys because they never seemed to be very interested in my questions. They were instead far more interested in convincing me about their answers. And so we would invariably get caught up into arguments about biblical inerrancy. If the Garden of Eden was real. What about evolution? What about the fossil record? If Noah's ark was real, how did Noah possibly fit two of every animal? Every bird. Every insect. Oh, and what about the dinosaurs? Come on. Right? This was the level of the conversations at times. Remember late night dorm rooms?

And they tried to explain how it could all fit together scientifically. They would loan me books. But honestly I was never too interested in their answers because it always seemed to boil down to some version of Chris, God loves you, but God needs you to believe as we do, or it's not going to go good for you at the end. That was essentially their summary of John 3:16, one of the most famous verses in the Bible, which we just heard. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

And I had grown up seeing those John 3:16 signs at football games. It's printed at the bottom of In-N-Out cups. A Baptist friend of mine signed my high school yearbook with it. I understood it to be a kind of summary of the faith, a kind of gospel in a nutshell, but somehow in their hands it always came across as a kind of ultimatum. You need to believe like we do. And if you do, you're in, and if you don't, you are out. Being born again or born from above, as we heard it translated today, it wasn't ever a metaphor for spiritual awakening. It was code for you have to sound like us, you have to look like us, you have to believe like us.

And it was always that kind of setup that kept me from seeing Christianity as any kind of spiritual path worth exploring for most of my life. And if you look at surveys, I'm certainly not alone in that. When the gospel gets turned into a simple matter of believing the right things in order to win God's favor or else, it loses all of its transformative power. It robs it of its magic and its mystery. It turns something that is about unconditional love into something very conditional and thus very ordinary. It becomes something to be anxious about, to feel pressured into. Who needs more of that in their life?

Well, obviously my journey didn't end there, but if you want to hear the rest, you need to come to spiritual autobiography on Wednesday night. But I wanted to share that much because I see echoes of those late night dorm room conversations in today's gospel. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and he's a member of the Sanhedrin. He's part of the religious elite, but he too is a seeker. He too has questions. Questions that he either doesn't feel safe to ask or questions whose answers are no longer adding up. In public, Nicodemus was part of the religious establishment, a defender of the faith, but in private, he seems to be having some doubts. And he apparently sees something in Jesus, something that's missing from his life.

Despite his education, despite his knowledge of the scriptures, despite his careful devotion to his religious practices, despite his power and his wealth, he sees something in this uneducated, uncredentialed, penniless, homeless street preacher named Jesus. And so he comes to see him at night. After all, someone of his stature, someone of his reputation couldn't be seen seeking counsel from

this Jesus, who just days before had caused a near riot at the temple by turning over the tables of the money changers. So he visits Jesus under the cover of darkness.

But more than just protecting his reputation, remember that darkness and light are important metaphors in the Gospel of John. Darkness represents the world without the light of Christ. And so Nicodemus has caught a glimpse of that light in Jesus. And so he comes to him by night so that he might find a way out of his own darkness. Before Nicodemus, can he even ask a question, did you notice Jesus is already answering it? Truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without first being born from above.

In other words, Nicodemus, the things you're looking for, the thing you've been missing will not come from more knowledge, will not be found in more religious obligations. Glimpsing the kingdom of God isn't going to be about praying the right way or believing the right things. It's not only about the afterlife either. The life eternal is a whole new way of being in the here and the now. A whole new way of interacting with the world, a whole new way of seeing yourself in one another so that this world might come to resemble the next one.

And to be clear, I'm not saying we need to throw out religion. I'm not saying we need to stop studying the Bible or to quit coming to church. What I'm saying is, and what I hear Jesus saying is to remember that they are not the point in and of themselves. It's the thing they are pointing us to that matters. It's that new life, that rebirthed life that Jesus wants us to experience that matters. When they become the end rather than a means to that new beginning, they become just another idol.

And I think that's Nicodemus' problem in a nutshell. He is still too caught up in mastering the world of religious rules and requirements to see the inner transformation to which they have been trying to point him all along. And to my campus crusader friends back in college who were so concerned that I share their beliefs and adopt their doctrines, I would say the same thing. It can't just be about belief. After all, we can believe all kinds of things and never lift a finger to help anyone. We can believe every word of the Bible. We can believe in every line in the creed. We can believe in the virgin birth. We can believe in all the miracle stories and still be utterly untransformed and just as self-centered and self-absorbed as the next person.

Ah, but Jesus knew what He was saying because if you look at the Greek word, which we translate as belief, the word is *pisteo*, it means far more than what we think of belief. It means something far more than just an intellectual assent to something as being true or having happened. A better translation would be that to which I give my heart, that to which I put my trust in, that to which I give my life to, my fidelity to. The belief that Jesus is talking about something, it isn't

something that happens up here that changes our mind. It's something that happens here that changes our life.

My six year old girls, they like to say to us, and I have no idea where they came up with this, but I think they might have figured this out. Because whenever we drop them off somewhere, whenever we say goodnight and turn off the light, they make a little symbol of a heart with their hands and they look through it and they say, "Daddy, I'm putting my heart on you." That's where that rebirth happens. That's where it begins. Putting your heart on Jesus, putting your heart on the people that Jesus loves, letting your heart break for them, letting your heart break open for them, that's where we begin to find the light that Nicodemus came looking for.

And notice, we don't really hear how their conversation ended. And yes, Nicodemus certainly sounds a bit baffled by it all. Yet something happened. Something began to turn in Nicodemus' heart that night. Because by the end of John's gospel, as Jesus hangs crucified, having given up His last breath, after all the other disciples had fled in fear, there stands Nicodemus at the foot of the Cross. No longer worried about who sees him, no longer hiding under the cover of darkness. He comes with myrrh and aloes to anoint the body of Jesus in the best way he knows how. He comes ready to bear the broken and lifeless body of his now crucified Lord. Any questions he might still have, any doubts he might still harbor, they can wait because his heart has broken open and his life will never be the same.

May this Lent be the space we need to explore our questions, to live our doubts. Until we find the light we seek, may we too be broken open by a love that evades our wildest imagination, like a wind that will take us places we could never plan or never know, until the day comes when we too, find ourselves at the foot of the Cross to be born anew, to be born from above.