

What Do You Believe?

TEXT: John 3:1-17

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on March 1, 2026

From now until June I'm going to be focusing sermons on what we believe. I don't mean I'm going to be spouting Christian doctrines and saying those are things you have to believe. I think that's a destructive approach to faith. Real faith is not something external that imposes itself on us.

If you took all my sermons at Crawford to date and fed them into the AI chipper, a common theme would be the point that faith, as portrayed and encouraged in the Old and New Testaments is not coercive. The Israelites even had a choice about whether they wanted to be governed by the Ten Commandments, a choice they had to make at two different points in the wilderness. When Christians coerce others to adopt faith, which we have sadly done in various places and times for millennia, that is a grave departure from what the Bible teaches, and atrocity inevitably ensues.

We'll get to that more directly along the way, but here at the outset I want to assure you, that's not what this sermon series is about. These weeks are about helping each of you individually and all of us collectively to be able to both recognize and articulate what you already believe. While the church may want to hear people say "I believe in Jesus," to become a member; there are as many ways to interpret what it means to believe in Jesus as there are people to profess it. Lent is a time to look inward, and defining those things for ourselves, is the goal.

As we do that, you may find that along the way things that you always "believed," in some sense, are suddenly on the rocks, which can be very unsettling. That's fine. You're not in trouble. There are entire church movements going on as I speak about deconstructing and reconstructing faith. That is a good and necessary step to making a faith, that perhaps you were born into and just kind of absorbed by osmosis, your own, which is the goal here—to understand what each of you, in your heart of hearts, actually believes.

Another thing I have stressed a number of times since coming to Crawford is that I very much do *not* care what you *don't* believe. A faith that is empty of content is of zero interest to me. I would much rather have you tell me that you firmly believe Jesus was a space alien who came to earth during the Pleistocene, was frozen into the ice, discovered during the building of the pyramids, and thawed by space lasers in the first century than tell me that you *don't* believe in the virgin birth.

We can have a conversation about a positive belief, and I would certainly be interested in how you sourced the information on the Pleistocene. But, more importantly, I want to help each of us understand how the beliefs that we hold impact our lives, relationships, and well-being.

Not believing in the virgin birth, for example, is a non-starter very literally. It doesn't go anywhere except to a Monty-Pythonesque "Yes, she was. No, she wasn't" debate. But you can turn that into a positive belief and get the ball rolling. Tell me who you think Mary was, not who she wasn't. What were her circumstances in your mind? If you believe she's a fictional character, then tell me that and we can talk about how you view the stories where she appears, whether you feel a connection to her in those stories, and what they might or might not have to teach us.

Same for "I don't believe in the Bible." That is, to me, a lazy position. What do you mean by that? We've got Bibles here in every pew. Do you believe they don't exist? Do you not see words on the pages? Where do you believe they came from?

A lot of people who say they don't "believe in the Bible," and as the head of a Bible Society for thirteen years, I've spoken to many, are really referencing a very specific set of beliefs taken from biblical passages, often taken out of context, and used in ways that a person has found harmful or offensive. That's the movement I'm looking for—to get all of us actively engaged in our own faith.

Don't just kick the can and say, "I don't believe that." Fine. I don't care. What DO you believe. The things we *do* believe are the things that affect how we live and move in the world. The things we *do* believe shape our lives and the lives of those around us. And that impact—from person to person and the communities thus formed—was what mattered to Jesus and is what matters to me.

In moving from what we don't believe to what we do believe, we can stop checking our brains at the door of the church and begin to have real conversations. We can come to *understand* each other, even when the content of our beliefs is miles apart.

The passage Neil read from John 3 for our text this morning happens to be the lectionary passage for today, and I went with it because it is a great example of someone in the Bible trying to sort out his own beliefs. And it's also a great example of how single verses of the Bible can take on lives of their own, outside of the original context, and become doctrines forced on others.

Like many Protestants in my generation, we had to memorize Bible verses in Sunday School, and John 3:16 was one of the first we learned: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

We hear that verse today with over 2,000 years' worth of baggage attached to it. I mean in the year 325, the bishops at the First Council of Nicaea spent three months just trying to figure out what the word "begotten" meant, and I don't think that what they came up with in the Nicene Creed is terribly helpful in that regard.

And what does it actually mean to "believe in" Jesus? There is virtually nothing in that famous verse that provides definitions of the terms. "Everlasting life" to the Jews of the first century was a very different concept than what has come to us after being laundered through Greek philosophy.

And the other part of this dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus that gets thrown around like a wild game of Calvinball is the "born again" phrase. A bit of word study and glance at the notes in most Bible translations indicate that Greek words for "born again" in that verse can also be translated in English as "born from above." Fine, although Nicodemus clearly thought it was the former. But what does either of those things mean?

Let's look a bit at the context. In verse 1 we learn that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and that he was a "leader of the Jews." Too many Christians equate Pharisees with the bad guys in the New Testament. Not so. The general population in Israel in Jesus' day were typically fans of the Pharisees. They were the practical teachers who could explain and interpret the Law of Moses that most people couldn't read for themselves or figure out how to apply in their own circumstances. A good and necessary role in a religious society.

So, Nicodemus is a Pharisee, but not all Pharisees would be described as a "leader of the Jews." That extra phrase here means Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the political group in Israel that served as the nation's supreme court. Both Pharisees and Sadducees, who were the priests serving in the temple and other shrines, were on the Sanhedrin; and Nicodemus was a member of that group.

So, verse one establishes that Nicodemus is a widely-respected scholar with skills that also put him in a position of power in Israel's government. Verse 2 tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. That carries exactly the implications that you would think. Nicodemus didn't want to be observed visiting Jesus. Pharisees who wanted to take Jesus on in religious debate do so many times in the Bible and they do it quite publicly, where both onlookers and Jesus' disciples could hear. Why is Nicodemus coming by night?

Ah, context. Remember that the Bible wasn't written with chapter and verse divisions. The event that John's gospel puts right before this encounter, at the end of chapter two, is an event that the other three gospels put in the last week of Jesus' life—the time Jesus heads into the temple, makes a whip, and does his best Indiana Jones interpretation with the moneychangers in the Temple. That was not something that went over well with religious authorities, and Nicodemus was a religious authority with a role in government.

Jesus was publicly challenged in the moment, which you can read in chapter two, but immediately after that, Nicodemus, a learned scholar comes to Jesus by night. A different Pharisee might have come at night with a dagger; but not Nicodemus. He's no doubt troubled by what had just happened in the temple, but he's curious, and is trying to figure out exactly who he is dealing with, and why Jesus is doing what he is doing, likely because he expects to be dealing with the fallout in his day job on the Sanhedrin and wants to get it right.

But there's also an indication that he is coming representing others with similar questions. Maybe they cast lots to see who would sneak out to question Jesus in private, but note that Nicodemus doesn't ask his question in the first person—he doesn't even start with a question. He starts by indicating he's not coming with the dagger. He addresses Jesus with respect as a Rabbi and says, "Rabbi, *we* know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

So, Nicodemus and whoever else is included in "we" in that first statement, who are likely also members of the Sanhedrin, have recognized that God is with Jesus. They may not yet be Jesus-followers, but neither are they hostile to him. They are Jesus-curious.

And in verse three, Jesus returns the affirmation and respect for Nicodemus, when he says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can *see* the kingdom of God without being born again." Jesus is essentially saying that Nicodemus has been able to recognize God's work in Jesus precisely because Nicodemus himself has had a spiritual birth.

But Nicodemus, a scholar used to parsing every word of the law, stumbles on the "born again" language. Given how things began, I think Jesus may have been a bit taken aback by someone as well-trained as Nicodemus taking "born again" literally. Jesus patiently explains, "No, a grown man is not going to be crawling back into a physical birth canal. We're talking about a spiritual birth here. We're born first of the waters of the womb and then we are metaphorically born a second time when we discover the spiritual dimension of life."

This blows Nicodemus' mind, and he says, "How can these things be?" and Jesus seems to suddenly realize he's got his work cut out for him when he responds, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Jesus might have expected that from those who had never studied, who lived a subsistence lifestyle and were understandably focused only on what they could see and hear and touch. But Nicodemus? The highest levels of religious learning and authority can't recognize a metaphor when they hear one? The ones charged with teaching everyone else about the God of Israel, and ruling on the teachings of others, can't even grasp the concept of spirit? Yikes!

We could go on through the rest of the section, which has interesting debate around the actual text, since punctuation isn't in the earliest manuscripts either and John provides special challenges in determining where exactly Jesus stops speaking and John himself starts inserting his own comments. And it's interesting to note the effect of the discussion on Nicodemus later in John's Gospel, which will get to next week.

But in this first direct encounter, we're looking at how Nicodemus tries to figure out what Jesus is actually teaching and what he, Nicodemus, thinks about that. His first instinct is to take his words literally, which Jesus rejects outright. Jesus responds with a whole section on flesh and spirit and how it's necessary to be born both ways—through the waters of the womb as a human, but also to have a spiritual birth, which can happen at any time thereafter.

But the question Jesus leaves hanging in the air is how such a spiritual birth comes about. We understand, at least in general terms, how human birth comes about. But how does one experience a spiritual birth? How do we know if such a thing has happened to us or to anyone else?

Most of Christianity has been filled with the wide variety of answers to that question—beliefs about what a spiritual birth requires, the signs that accompany it or don't, whether it is limited to people of one particular religion or to any religion at all, whether a spiritual birth is the same thing as salvation, etc. Jesus doesn't answer those questions here—and we have to search out each piece of it in other places.

We'll be thinking about that puzzle and its perils as we move through Lent and beyond. But a key thing about the beliefs in any religious system is that they are intertwined with other beliefs in an attempt to make the whole system function as a cohesive whole. Complicating matters, different traditions in Christianity have put those systems of connected belief together in different and sometimes conflicting ways.

So, as we sit with the questions about what might constitute a spiritual birth and how someone might get there, next week we'll tack on one of the connected questions about the relationship between belief and action; faith and works.

You can expect the book of James to make an appearance, even if someone is dropping nuclear warheads by then. Because war, and corruption, and cruelty in every shape and form come from beliefs that have gone off the rails, and if we want to prevent them—or at least some of them—understanding how what we believe is connected to what we do, gives us the path to doing something about it. Amen.