

*From Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Schooley's Desk:  
A Sermon for Sunday, March 5, 2023 - Lent 2*

For about fourteen hundred years – between the second and the sixteenth centuries – you would wake up, watch the sunrise in the east, go to work all day as the sun arced high overhead, and then watch the sun set in the west shortly before going to bed. From your vantage point, it would appear that you were stable and the sun moved. But then Nicolaus Copernicus comes along and upends everything you thought you knew – everything you thought you had witnessed with your very own eyes thousands of times – and told you that you were wrong. In actuality, the sun was stable and the earth was both spinning around *and* orbiting the sun. That, in fact, what looked like the sun moving across the sky was actually the earth spinning on its axis. It is honestly surprising that Copernicus wasn't killed for this. People don't like being told what they think they're seeing with their very own eyes is wrong. If it's any consolation, his intellectual protégé, Galileo, would take some lumps for providing the empirical evidence of Copernicus' claims.

You already know this story, I'm guessing. Probably not as well as our resident astronomer, Dale back there, but at least the broad outline. What you may not have known – what I can definitely say I didn't know before researching this sermon – was that Copernicus' heliocentric model of the cosmos did not originate with him, *per se*. That's why I noted that it was only from the second to the sixteenth centuries that geocentrism reigned. Prior to that, it was an open debate, but Aristotelean cosmology ultimately won in the second century and so, for roughly a millennia-and-a-half, the wrongheadedness of geocentrism was allowed to persist.

The switch from geocentric models of the cosmos to heliocentric is what we can rightly call a “paradigm shift” – and paradigm shifts can be really, really hard to swallow. These are, of course, different than merely changing your mind. We can change our minds for any number of reasons. For example, I liked Chris Pratt when he was the goofy guy, Andy, on *Parks and Rec*, but then I learned more about some of his past relationships – and he got all swole for those *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies – and I decided I didn't like him as much. I prefer to keep my comedians chubby and funny. This has absolutely nothing to do with my self-perception. My change of mind is not a big deal. Chris is not losing sleep over this, I'm sure. But a paradigm shift is different than switching your favorite pizza toppings or deciding you aren't watching the next *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie because the main character makes you insecure... I mean, because he used to be chubby like me and now he isn't... er, I mean, because his acting skills have really gone down the drain. Yeah, that's the reason.

A paradigm shift, on the other hand, is big. It's a change to the very *ways* you think, not just *what* you think. As you can imagine, paradigm shifters – like ol' Nico Copernicus – are extremely

controversial figures. Their legacies get debated for decades, if not centuries. Indeed, if Galileo hadn't come along with advanced telescopic technology that more or less proved Copernicus right, we might still be debating geo versus heliocentrism. As it stands, the worst we have to face now is a few athletes who still try to claim the earth is flat. But we'll let Neil deGrasse Tyson sort those fellas out for us.

Well, from the Nico of Copernicus to the Nicodemus of our Gospel story this morning we go. See how I crushed that transition? Nicodemus is also facing a hard paradigm shift in his late night, surreptitious conversation with Jesus the Christ. Jesus is also a paradigm shifter and while a slick new ad campaign would have you believe “He Gets Us,” the biblical witness would certainly present Him more along the lines of “He Challenges Us.” That is, at any rate, what He's doing to the Nico of his day.

For context, we have to attend carefully to where Nicodemus begins this clandestine conversation: “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.” This is a pretty good thesis statement for their conversation insofar as Nicodemus shows us his paradigm – namely, “the presence of God,” which makes sense given that he's a pious Pharisee. Nicodemus senses the presence of God in Jesus. It is most likely, then, that Nicodemus thinks Jesus is a new prophet – like Ezekiel or Isaiah or Jeremiah before him. Within Nicodemus' paradigm, God often sends prophets, especially in times of exile or oppression. Indeed, most of our Old Testament prophets are raised up during a crisis for Israel. Well, Israel is presently occupied by Rome, which is crisis enough to warrant some prophetic intervention. Nicodemus' paradigm sets him up for this conversation, but it is as wrong-headed as Ptolemy's geocentric model of the cosmos.

Instead, what we encounter is Jesus reframing the conversation from “the presence of God” to “the Kingdom of God.” Just look at how Jesus answers Nicodemus: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” This introduction of “the Kingdom of God” is a small change in language, but a HUGE change in paradigm. You see, Nicodemus would understand God as present in the Temple, but functionally working in the lives of faithful Israelites vis-à-vis the Law – or the Torah – or what we understand as the first five books of the Bible. It was through the Law and its signs of this covenant – child-bearing, circumcision, and the like – that Israel would be assured that God was with them. There was nothing within this paradigm that would lead a Pharisee like Nicodemus to ponder the possibility that God would become incarnate as a human and reside in their midst. There was, further, nothing in this paradigm that would lead a faithful Pharisee to consider that even if God became

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incarnate that God would die. Yet this is precisely the paradigm-shifting message Jesus brings.

I realize that there's a lot of discussion about what it means to be "born from above" or "born again" in this dialogue – and I further realize that "born again" comes with its own theological and sociological baggage in our day – but the real point of this conversation comes later in the passage when Jesus compares Himself to the bronze serpent held up on a pole in the wilderness that kept wandering Israel safe from snakebites, just so long as they kept looking at that bronze serpent. Since this is the crux of the matter, I'm going to skip worrying our heads over what "born from above" or "born again" means. That is, to be sure, paradigm-shifting language, but its force and import pales in comparison to Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, subtly foretelling His own death on the cross. For that's precisely what Jesus means in comparing Himself to the bronze serpent.

As we covered last week, the serpent is a no good, very bad figure in the Old Testament. Not just the one that duped Adam and Eve, but also all those venomous vermin that were nibbling the ankles of wandering Israel. Simply put, serpents represented sin and death. And now here is Jesus – the one Nicodemus has already conceded is "a teacher who has come from God" – making identification with the sin-and-death-representing serpent. It is completely and utterly confounding. Nicodemus is confounded.

The sum total of this story is about what it takes to find new life in Christ, in the Jewish Messiah. Even if Nicodemus had gone so far as to recognize Jesus as the Messiah – and there's no indication he has accepted that fact just yet – he still would've had certain paradigm-informed assumptions about just who and what the Messiah was to be and do. And, suffice it to say, the Messiah would not be identified with a serpent. Nicodemus likely would've held the view that the Messiah would come as a socio-political revolutionary figure. That is, the Messiah would help set Israel straight – get them back in line with the Law – and would help Israel conquer any occupying force, returning them as sole possessors of the Promised Land, per God's original plan for God's people. There were internal debates as to whether the Messiah would more militaristic or prophetic, but everyone agreed that the Messiah would signal God's merciful intervention that re-established Israel's blessed place amongst the nations. But, again, at no point did anyone consider the idea that the Messiah's *death* would be how Israel (and the whole world) would be blessed. Their paradigm just couldn't support that sort of idea.

Yet the biggest paradigm shift still awaits us, lingering just beneath the surface of these words. For central to Nicodemus' paradigm and our own is the assumption that we are presently alive. Being alive, we fear death. Yet Jesus upends this paradigm by essentially presenting us as already dead and in need of new life. This is why, I suspect, Jesus

focuses some of His teachings on what it means to be "born from above" or "born again." We could lose the rest of the day unpacking language like "born again" because it is both theologically dense and sociologically conflicted, but even a surface-level reading will suffice to help us see that our current lives and our current paradigms are insufficient to the new life by water and Spirit being offered to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Indeed, I suspect some part of us already knows this. I suspect this because of the stunning popularity of zombie shows. *The Walking Dead* just ended its twelve-year run on television, just in time for *The Last of Us* on HBO to fill that zombie vacuum. Some part of our culture, and our souls?, is obsessed with the notion of the living dead. I contend that obsession originates in some latent understanding that none of us are as alive as we're made to be.

Even still, nothing in our zombie-infused culture will prepare us for the paradigm-shifting words and work of Jesus Christ. Far from just functioning better within our current paradigms, Jesus calls us *fully* into a new life, including new paradigms. Lent, as a season in which we practice self-sacrifice and meditate upon the Cross of Jesus Christ, is a near-perfect expression of this new paradigm we're called into by water and the Spirit. It is in this season that we recommit to embracing full life in Christ instead of our walking dead existences. It is in this season that we reject cultural popularity, instead identifying with those the culture rejects – immigrant, queer, poor, Black, disabled, addicted, depressed, and anxious. It is in this season that we eschew cultural power – not entrusting ourselves or this world to political machinations that fail us time and time and time and time again, but rather trusting that it is God "who so loved the world that..."

How Jesus' time with Nicodemus concludes is unclear. There's definitely no "altar call" at the end of this story. It just sort of fades to black. We *do* know that Nicodemus is one of two men who collect Jesus' dead body and gets it situated in its tomb. My personal hope for Nicodemus is that this conversation prepared him for the real paradigm-shifting work of the resurrection – that is, for that bright day when the paradigm of death was replaced by the paradigm of new life. Come to think of it, that's my hope for all of us this Lenten season.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.