

March 20, 2022
The Third Sunday in Lent
Pastor Matt Duerr

Witness to Christ-The Pharisee

Grace mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Well last week we began a new sermon series on the eyewitnesses to Christ. And we focused on the idea of what would it be like if we put Jesus on trial. We have eyewitnesses we could call from the past and put them in the witness stand. What would they say? What would it be like? And why would we trust them? We looked at John the Baptist last week as a potential first witness. The son of a Levite, Zechariah, and his wife Elizabeth. And we saw that John, whose birth was foretold and was a miracle, lived a life of purpose. His mission was to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, that he would be the voice in the wilderness crying out, preparing the way of the Lord by proclaiming, “repent the Kingdom of heaven is near.” And John knew Jesus was the One, not because he had met Him previously but because God had told him, ‘the One on whom the spirit descends in the form of the dove and stays on, is the One.’ And so, when he saw Jesus coming down to be baptized, he saw that take place and he proclaimed, “behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

This week, we call another witness. But as I'm sure you've seen in court dramas, or maybe you've been in court yourself; a lot of times there's a whole lot of lawyers sitting at the different tables. And a different lawyer is going to take on Nicodemus. This one is not going to follow the kind of hands-off approach that was used with John the Baptist when they just started out with a general question of you know could you please tell us a little about yourself. No, this one is going to get right down to the point.

And so, let's walk into that courtroom. Let's take a look at what's happening as Nicodemus is called to the stand. Are you the Nicodemus, who Martin Luther King junior referred to in his August 16th, 1967 speech? Where he called for the residents and the citizens of the United States to be quote, “born again?” “I am.” And now are you the Nicodemus

who has a town in the state of Kansas named after him? "I am." And are you the Nicodemus who the great reformer John Calvin accused of duplicity and coining the term 'Nicodemite' for others such duplicitous persons? "Yes, that would be me." And are you the Nicodemus figuratively used in Henry clay's 1864 American Civil War musical composition titled "Wake Nicodemus?" "I am." Are you the subject of Henry Vendome's poem, 'The Knight'?" "I am." And, are you the Nicodemus who carved the holy face of Luca and the Butler crucifix? "I am not! No, no, that was some guy who used my name; but he did it over 1000 years after I left. No, that's not me!"

So, then getting back to the point, you are the Nicodemus in the Bible. You are the Nicodemus who was a pharisee. A member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Is that correct? "Yes." And did you really meet with Jesus at night? "I did." And did you defend His right to a hearing before that council? "Yes, I did." And finally, did you, with the help of Joseph of Arimathea, bury Jesus, the convicted seditionist following his state appointed execution? "Yes and no." What? It's a simple question, you can't have both answers! 'Well, understand yes, I did bury him with the help of Joseph of Arimathea, a fellow pharisee. But no, He was not a convicted seditionist! There was no legal trial. The trial that was held was held at night which was and is illegal according to Jewish law. Secondly, you need two witnesses who agree. There were no witnesses who agreed. They were all over the place, and everything they talked about wasn't criminal anyways. Third, He was told to testify against Himself. Ironically, when the high priest asked him a question, "are you the Christ, the son of the blessed, and then commanded Him tell us plainly. Jesus did. He told us plainly. He said, "I Am." And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven. And that is when the high priest hollered out, 'Blasphemy! What more do you need to hear?'

Now understand, blasphemy is to make a mockery of God, or the things of God. Or worse yet, to claim to be God. And so, when Jesus said 'yes I Am' to that question: (Are you the Christ, the son of the blessed?) Caiaphas didn't just yell blasphemy, he tore his high priestly robe, which by the way, was also illegal. But it was a show an absolute show and you know was pretty despicable. Because here they go through all of this and

he's the blasphemer, and just a matter of hours later when they go to the Romans to Pilate, they say 'well the charge is sedition, he's inciting a riot.' OK, I see Nicodemus. Now don't get so worked up here. It's just a court of law. We're just trying to get to the truth.

So, doesn't Jewish law call for death of blasphemers? Indeed, it does, no argument there. There are just two major problems here. First, a blasphemer is to be taken out and stoned not sent to the occupying Romans to have them crucify Him. You see, law and justice is not a matter of convenience. Which I'm sure you are very aware of as a lawyer. I'm one myself. But on several occasions, my brothers heard Jesus speak and they were quite offended by what He said. He claimed to be God, which is blasphemy. And they tried to do what the law tells us to do. They tried to stone Him, but when they would pick up the stones, and they get everybody riled up to stone Him. They'd go to throw it, and they couldn't throw the stones and Jesus would just walk through them and leave. And on top of that, their hatred was so great that they went to the Romans knowing what Deuteronomy 21:23 says, "cursed is everyone who was hanged on a tree." They went to the Romans to do an accursed thing. My colleague Paul, or Saul who most of you know was Paul; he even wrote about that in Galatians 3:3 in his letter those people of Galatia.

But the second thing is that He was claiming to be God, which some would see as mocking to be God, but let's really look at that. And if you don't mind, as one attorney to another, might I ask you a question? Oh, look here, this is a court of law. I'm the attorney, you're the witness. But you know earlier you talked about wanting to get to the truth. And you know for us Jews, there's a way to do that. It's called rabbinical teaching. It's asking questions until you get to the point where you ask the ultimate question, which has then the ultimate answer, which is truth. I just beg that you would indulge me this one time.

OK, what's your question? Well, I'm sure that you've read up on the Jewish faith. When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, and He said, I Am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Was He blaspheming? Nicodemus, Surely, you jest! Of course, that's not blaspheming, it was God speaking. If God says He's God He's God, that's

not blasphemy! That's a crazy question! No actually, it gets us the truth. If God says He is God, He is not blaspheming.

This is why I went to see Jesus as you had mentioned earlier. Jesus was doing two things. He was doing miracles, something only God can do. And He was preaching with authority as if He was God Himself. So, I went to check Him out. Because to me, I thought there was just two possible answers here. He was either a very Spirit filled teacher or prophet because He was doing what only God could do; and He was opening the scriptures to us. Or He was God Himself.

That's why I defended Him, as you mentioned. It's recorded in that gospel of John Chapter 7. I defended His right to a trial before the council, it was the right thing to do. But after I met with Him, He kept on doing those things. He immediately went out and He healed a man that was lame, at the pool of Bethesda. Then a couple days later, He fed 5000 men, along with their wives and their children with just a couple of fish and some small dinner rolls. And He began to then teach that He, using the name of God for Himself, Yahweh was the bread of life. And He taught that everyone who looks to the Son, and believes in Him, will have eternal life, and that He would raise them up on the last day. And then it's straight out of our Scriptures. This is what God will do.

So, He did what only God could do and He spoke of what God has promised to do. And the Pharisees my brothers the Sanhedrin our ruling council, that threatened them. They were afraid because people were following Jesus. They thought if they followed Him and think of Him as well as God, the promised Messiah; they won't see a need to come to the temple anymore. They won't see a need to give their offerings here to us. I tell you we make a very good living off of those offerings; and they were threatened. Again, ironically Jesus Himself showed respect to us. He and His disciples, they tithed. They came to the temple shall we say religiously, and it's what He taught the people to do. And yet they were scared that because of Him the people might stop.

You know, when I met Him, He told me that I would see the son of man lifted up. He told me that whoever would believe in Him, would have eternal life. And He told me that whoever does what is true will come to the light. My brothers in the Sanhedrin, and Pilate, the Roman

governor; they did not do what was true. It is very interesting, especially the Sanhedrin, they did it all at night, not in the light where people can see. They took Jesus, they arrested Him, they beat Him, they abused Him, they tortured Him, they killed Him. And in the process, Jesus fulfilled yet more prophecy, more Scripture. There's the prophets tell us that the Messiah would not defend Himself. He would not speak out against His abusers. What tremendous strength He had and yet they mocked Him for that.

That is why I took the risk. I broke ranks, together with Joseph of Arimathea. Guilty as charged. We buried Him. What was done was wrong. Jesus deserved better, and yet as we buried Him, we felt guilty, very guilty. As well you should I might add! You turned your back on your brothers, you betrayed them. You, yourselves became seditious, and doing such a thing, He was found guilty. He was killed and you left your brothers hanging with that. "Oh no, no, no my friend you have it quite wrong. We didn't feel guilty because we betrayed them. No, we felt guilty because we had betrayed Him. We buried Him. He said He was going to rise on the third day. We didn't need to bury Him. We buried Him like he was dead not coming back. We didn't believe Him. It's impossible for the dead to rise! And yet here's Jesus the One who kept doing everything that only God could do, speaking the truth of God's word, as only God could do, and we still didn't believe Him."

"But you know what? Then He did it. He did rise from the dead. And for both Joseph and I, that sealed it. He's exactly who He said He is the Christ of God. He is, as John the Baptist had told us when we went out to question him three years ago. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He's the real deal! He is my Lord. He is my Savior, and not just my Savior, the Savior of all mankind. If you will just stop, and take a look, and hear His call; that same Spirit that revealed Him to us, will reveal Him to you." In our Saviors' Name, Amen.