

Being Born Again

The gospel passage in the lectionary for today contains the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a member of the strict Jewish party of the Pharisees, but who obviously yet secretly wanted to know more about Jesus. Reading our text from John's Gospel, chapter 3:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

For many years evangelical believers like Baptists have been familiar with the term "born again," and we always thought we knew what it meant. We had understood it to refer to the experience of faith in and conversion to Jesus Christ. But secular culture co-opted this term in multitudinous ways. We read about an actor or an athlete, whose career was about to wane, suddenly being "born again" to new popularity and success. A business is advertised as "born again" under the new management of a CEO who promises to lead them back to prominence and success.

As far as I know, Jesus originated this term, as he made it very clear to Nicodemus, repeating and rewording the need to be born again and to be born of the Spirit. What Jesus told him wasn't a suggestion. It was and still is imperative. Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed and everyone needs to be born again to be complete. Nicodemus was a highly educated and influential religious leader of the Jews. He knew the Bible, which in his time was the Old Testament and all the oral tradition and extra-biblical laws and regulations. No doubt, being a member of the religious "Supreme Court," Nicodemus was a highly respected moral man and leader in his community. But with all that being true, Nicodemus knew he was not complete. Something was missing in his life.

A lot of Bible scholars have opinions about why Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. Some suggest he was perhaps ashamed to seek an audience with Jesus, who was a carpenter's son, and lacked any formal religious credentials. But this could hardly be the case since Nicodemus seems to have come not only on his own, but also as a representative of other Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin ruling body.

Others speculate that rabbis/teachers in that day did most of their academic work and study at night. Another is the idea that night was associated with spiritual darkness, which is a theme throughout John's gospel. Nicodemus, although a great religious teacher, could do nothing to dispel his own spiritual darkness. The dark is associated with spiritual darkness and ignorance. Even though Nicodemus was a religious scholar, and knew a lot about the Bible, he was still in the dark about the most important truth about God and his salvation. Dark is also associated with the darkness of sin and evil, and our inability to wash the dark of sin away from our hearts.

Night is usually when we think the most about spiritual issues. And, when things are not right with our souls, the problems seem magnified at night. At night loneliness and fear seem greater. Daytime is a time for busyness, and we give little thought to eternal matters, such as our soul's destiny. But this night Nicodemus thought about his need, and in the context of the spiritual dark night of his soul, he comes to seek Jesus.

I remember being awakened one night in my college dorm room by a knocking on the door. I opened the door to see there before me one of my football teammates. I had never before seen this look on the face of Brad Riddle. Brad's face was deeply troubled. Before, Brad had been a confident, even cocky running back whose college life was characterized by football and fraternity parties. But that night Brad, who had just been in a near-death car-train accident during spring break, came to my room asking me to pray with him that he might become a Christian—that he might be born again.

Brad had grown up in a church family in southeastern Ohio, yet he didn't know Jesus. He hadn't been born again. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, just as he had been born physically, he needed to be born again, this time spiritually and from heaven. Flesh gives birth to flesh, Jesus explained, but the Spirit of God alone can cause a person to be born the second time. Because of our sin problem, all are spiritually dead and separated from holy God. We need what God alone can do for us. Unless and until a person is born this second time, life will remain incomplete and empty and unprepared to face God in eternity.

Nicodemus' religious credentials and great education did no good as far as being born again was concerned. Likely also is the fact that Nicodemus came from a religious family. But he still needed to be born again.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, *What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit* (6).

When Nicodemus heard Jesus say he must be born again, he completely misunderstood. How amazing, that a man like Nicodemus, a well-trained theologian, seemed so obtuse about the idea of a spiritual birth and a re-birth! The Old Testament abounds with the idea of God's bringing life to

dead objects, and God's restoring the dead to life, and giving a new beginning. This idea begins with the creation and continues with the entire nation of Israel. God is featured as the life giver and restorer of life.

Jesus was talking about spiritual truth. Nicodemus said what Jesus was talking about seemed to be radical and impossible, like entering his mother's womb as an adult! Jesus answered that being born again *is* radical. It means that we're born of water and the Spirit, as Ezekiel prophesied (Ez. 36:25-26), which is a passage of Scripture that surely Nicodemus knew. Yet obviously he failed to understand its meaning. The overwhelming witness of Scripture is that only God can cleanse the heart that turns from sin and believes in Jesus, who causes us to come to new life in him by the power of the resurrection (I Pet. 3:21).

Nicodemus, this highly respected, dignified, and educated religious leader, was talking to Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter from Nazareth, who'd never been to rabbinical/religious school. Jesus replies to Nicodemus' unbelief by saying by implication, "how can you not understand this, being 'the Reverend Dr. Professor Nicodemus'?" Jesus sought to explain to him about the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion that makes the rebirth experience possible. Sometimes those who have the most familiarity with spiritual truth can be most blinded to its real meaning.

It's possible for someone steeped in church life, for example, to be so glibly familiar with the church's language and traditions that the reality is lost. CS Lewis once said he was glad he was not a professional theologian, because of the inherent peril of thinking that because you can explain something you are deceived into thinking you've experienced the same. This seems to be what Jesus referred to when he said those who claim to see are often the truly blind to God's truth and revelation (Jn. 9:39-40).

Jesus says to Nicodemus that the rebirth isn't by his moral goodness, knowledge or religious experience. Jesus describes the work of God in bringing about the rebirth. It is a work by the water of God's cleansing and the power of the Holy Spirit. By his grace and power God provides for our salvation. Only because of God's love did his Son come into the world to save us. His death, the sinless one for sinners, made possible the forgiveness of our sins, the washing away of our guilt to make us holy in God's sight.

Perhaps the most popular hymn, not only in the church, but also in general society, is *Amazing Grace*. John Newton, son of an English slave trader, who himself became a drunken, reckless slave trafficker, came to receive God's amazing grace. After almost dying on board a ship during a storm, Newton made his peace with God and wrote his testimony in the song, *Amazing Grace*.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.*

Jesus referred to the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion as the free power of God to do his work in the human heart. We can't see the power of God anymore than we can see the wind. All we

see is the result of the blowing wind. Likewise, all we can see is the result of God's Spirit who changes the hearts and lives of those who are born again.

As you well know, our area was hit this past week with devastating, destructive wind. Jan took me on a tour to see numerous huge trees totally uprooted by the storm. Those of us who lived in Kansas know something of the power of the wind. I remember walking around houses near our neighborhood that were devastated by a tornado in '91. The power of that wind was amazing, turning cars inside out, and leveling houses as though they were razed by a giant bulldozer. This illustrates the power of the Holy Spirit in the rebirth. God is able to lift our hearts and lives from the foundation of unbelief, and turn us around. He doesn't destroy us, but he turns us around toward him and his saving grace. He then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, places our lives on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ has the same power to turn our life around and lift us up and set us down on the firm foundation of his word. Perhaps when Jesus was talking with Nicodemus there was a wind howling through the door. Perhaps Nicodemus was reminded that the unseen and yet powerful force of the wind of God is a symbol of the powerful Holy Spirit.

After giving us the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, John gives us the most famous verse in the Bible, the sixteenth, what Martin Luther called "The Gospel in Miniature":

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

John reminds us that if we reject what Christ has done for us to save us, the only alternative is to remain under condemnation and then to die eternally lost and separated from God (18). Our part is simply to respond to what Jesus has done in childlike faith. Jesus said the Good News is designed for childlike faith. In fact, Jesus said if we don't come to him like little children we can't enter the kingdom of God (Mk, 10:15).

The rebirth is possible because God has done his part. Our part is to simply believe Jesus and trust and follow him. Jesus offered Nicodemus and he offers us the free gift of eternal life beginning right now. Being born again is an expression of new beginnings. The Bible tells about God's new beginnings with his people. After the flood, there was a new beginning, a rebirth of God's people. After the exodus there was a new beginning. After the exile, there was a new beginning when God allowed the Israelites to return to the Promised Land. And, of course, the death and resurrection of Jesus made possible the rebirth, this new beginning for all of us who believe in Jesus and turn from a self-centered life, indifferent to personal morality and social injustice.

And the entire Christian life is one of new beginnings. God doesn't stop working with us at the moment we first believe, at our moment of rebirth. The Christian life is a series of new beginnings and follows the pattern of death to self and resurrection to a new beginning. For the Christian, the best is always yet to be.

Dale Heights Church is facing a future that will even demand a new beginning. Your Session and Property and Finance people are prayerfully seeking God's direction for the future, which will be a new, and possibly even unimaginable new beginning, hopefully a new birth of purpose and mission, as we engage in Project Regeneration.

The great evangelist during the Great Awakening of the 18th Century in England, George Whitefield, preached for several days and nights in the open air from this passage we looked at today. He said over and over the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." One of his critics asked him, "Mr. Whitefield, when are you going to change your sermon topic from this text, "You must be born again?" Replied the great preacher: "When you are born again."

Give us your grace, Lord, to be your born-again people.