

Sermon for Sunday, July 12, 2009
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NEW LIFE FROM ABOVE
John 3:1-16

When Nicodemus met Jesus, there was a question in the air. Everyone could see that Jesus was a healer. But what did his works mean? Where do they point? Is Jesus a prophet, a teacher, a man of God? The Messiah?

People ask the same question today. But to us, his teachings are most obvious. The casual observer sees him as a wise man, a preacher who told people to call God "Father" and to love their enemies. And he was inclusive because he befriended anyone – lepers, prostitutes, Roman soldiers, and thieves.

Some people insist that Jesus was a teacher and nothing more. They deny his miracles or explain them away. He had great knowledge of healing herbs. He didn't walk on water, he knew where the sand bars were. He didn't multiply bread, he shared his lunch and everyone decided to share, too. These people deny that there is any connection between the historical Jesus, the Jew and the Christ of orthodox Christian faith – the Jesus we worship.

Nicodemus didn't quite fit into any of these categories, but he wasn't yet a disciple when we meet him in John 3. Jesus had just performed his first public miracles. He turned water into wine to complete the wedding celebration in the town of Cana. Did people see where that pointed? Abundance of wine is a sign, the prophets said, of the dawn of the Messianic Age and renewal of all things.

John says, "Many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them [literally "believe them"], for he knew what was in a man." (John 2:24-25).

Jesus' first signs caused some people to believe in him – after a certain fashion. But their faith is shallow. They "believed" Jesus but Jesus did not "believe" their faith was sound "for he knew what is in a man." Jesus does know "what is in a man." He knows what is in you and me and he knows how he needs to relate to each one of us.

1. Meet Nicodemus - John 3:2

The story of Nicodemus begins this way: "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus." So, Nicodemus was a man and Jesus knows what is in a man. Therefore he knows Nicodemus – better than Nicodemus knows himself. He knows Nicodemus is interested and respectful, but he also knows Nicodemus is far short of real faith. Jesus talks to him to bring him to complete faith.

Nicodemus was a leader - "a member of the Jewish ruling council." Jesus calls him "the teacher of Israel" – a great rabbi of his day (John 3:1, 10).

And Nicodemus had a high opinion of Jesus. He followed the reports about Jesus and he drew a conclusion. Jesus "is able to do signs" - signs that come from God: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him" (3:2).

He meant this as a great compliment. It's the language the Bible used to describe Moses and Jeremiah (Exodus 3:12, Jeremiah 1:19). And great as he is, Nicodemus declares that Jesus is his equal. He is a rabbi; he calls Jesus a rabbi, too. Nicodemus had to train for years to become a rabbi. But Nicodemus believes that God himself has made Jesus a rabbi, the member of his great guild. Again, this is very generous. He meets Jesus, rabbi to rabbi, hoping for dialogue.

Nicodemus "came to Jesus at night" to say this. Why at night? Not for any sinister reason. But to enjoy a long, private conversation. It was customary for rabbis to talk about Scripture late into the night.

But John says that night is the time when people stumble because they have no light (11:10). No one can see to work at night (9:4). Night is symbolic. Nicodemus thinks he sees clearly, but he is in the dark. At best, he sees dimly, like a man in a cave.

Nicodemus assumes he is in charge of the conversation. He tries to set the topic: Jesus' miracles prove that he is a teacher appointed by God. Nicodemus thinks he can tell who Jesus is by watching what he does – his signs.

Nicodemus wants to praise Jesus, but his praise is weak. Considering Jesus' signs, Nicodemus concludes Jesus is a godly teacher. That he is, but more - he is Son of God and Savior, far superior to Nicodemus and his peers.

Lots of people think this way, this shallow way: This person is prospering, therefore God must be on his side. We can also praise gifted people in a shallow, even selfish way. We say God has gifted you and he has gifted me, too. So we're on the same team and you should work with me. Ultimately it's a selfish way to co-opt someone's talents. Nicodemus seems to be thinking that way. God has gifted Jesus, we're both rabbis, so Jesus should be on my team.

As a leader of Israel, Nicodemus wants to bring Jesus into his orbit, on his team, perhaps under his control – on the ruling council perhaps. Maybe Nicodemus, the great teacher, wants to take the new rabbi under his wing. That could be exciting. It's hard to be sure of that, but we do know that Nicodemus wants to compliment Jesus and start a relationship. However, he doesn't know who Jesus is or what he's talking about. Who is Jesus? Nicodemus doesn't know but Jesus wants to take him there.

2. Nicodemus needs new life from above

Someone said: Jesus "refuses to carry on with courteous exchanges that get nowhere." True! Jesus never wasted words in idle talk. Neither should we. Jesus says that "men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36). Paul says, "Let your speech be seasoned with salt, that it may give grace to those who hear." Don't waste your words!

Jesus certainly didn't! He presses to the heart of the matter. First, he changes the subject. He does this so often that it's clearly a pattern, a way of life. Jesus changes topics or challenges agendas whenever he sees that it's necessary. He doesn't always answer the question as asked. He answers the questions people should ask. We can do the same. The Bible teaches us to imitate heroes of the faith; Jesus is the great hero. So let's follow him and lead people into conversations that matter.

Jesus begins emphatically: "Truly, truly I say to you, no one can even see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." That includes Nicodemus. In his current state, Nicodemus will never know Jesus, never see the kingdom of God. He must be "born again" or "born from above" (3:3). The Greek word *ajnwqen* can mean again or above. Nicodemus must be born anew, born from above, by God.

This is a metaphor. The second birth is spiritual, not physical from above. Nicodemus needs a second birth from above, from heaven, by God's Spirit if he hopes to "see the kingdom." That means to taste the resurrection and the renewal of all things when the Lord comes and sets the world right.

Jesus is saying something that shocked Nicodemus: he might miss the resurrection, when God made all things new? How could that be? He is a teacher and leader in Israel. He is a decent man, obeys the law, and belongs to the covenant. He even likes Jesus. Surely that's enough. In those days people thought so: All Jews expected to see the kingdom unless they deliberately rejected the faith - apostasy.

People often think the same thing today. "As long as I'm a good person and don't spit at God, I'll "go to heaven." Isn't that enough – for Nicodemus, for us? No. Jesus says that's completely wrong. Jesus is

the king of the earth. His kingdom began to arrive when Jesus arrived. It comes in full when Jesus returns. Nicodemus needs to know Jesus is king and give his allegiance. That will never happen as long as Nicodemus thinks Jesus is a rabbi – just like him.

Nicodemus thinks of Jesus as his peer. He looks at Jesus' signs and wonders. "Is he a prophet, a rabbi, the Messiah?" But as long as he thinks he can judge or evaluate Jesus, he will never believe in him. Nicodemus needs to stop asking "Is this the Messiah?" He must ask, "Am I ready for the Messiah?"

Nicodemus needs to see Jesus the right way and believe in him. For that, he needs to be born from above by the Spirit. Then he can become a child of God by faith in Jesus. (John 1:12-13) says: "To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Take this to heart. Nicodemus is a great man, a man of rank. Yet Jesus says, "You must be born again." "If Nicodemus, with his knowledge, gifts, position and integrity cannot enter the promised kingdom by virtue of his standing and works, what hope is there for anyone who seeks salvation" that way? None. That includes you and me. All of us must be born from above, born of the Spirit. Then we become a child of God by faith in Jesus the king.

When Jesus says, "You must be born again," he doesn't summon us to reform part of our life. Our "whole nature" must be renewed. Everything in us is "defective;" all must be renewed by the Spirit.

Nicodemus objects - John 3:4

Jesus said we must be reborn spiritually from above. But Nicodemus hears "born again" in the most literal sense. Why? Because he fails to see that Jesus comes from above. His misunderstanding shows how he needs "the very new birth of which Jesus speaks".

Nicodemus hears "born again" and sputters. "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Can a mature man, with all his size and experience, climb back into the womb and re-enter the world? It's impossible! (3:4)

Jesus means no such thing! We wonder: Is Nicodemus clueless? Or does he understand the metaphor and refuse to follow Jesus' lead? Maybe he wants to sabotage Jesus' point by making it look absurd...

People misunderstand the phrase "born again" today, too. Some of us get it because it's part of our heritage. To be "born again" means "I have a real, heartfelt faith in Jesus." Others associate "born again" with fundamentalism. They think it's part of a primitive, bigoted religion that's quick to judge and condemn. What's true?

3. Believers are born anew by God's Spirit - John 3:5

Jesus explains himself for Nicodemus, for us: "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (3:5). People who hope to enter God's Kingdom must be "born" in a new way, not by human striving but by a rebirth that only God can bring to pass.

The idea of rebirth wasn't common, but some religions called commitment to their faith a rebirth. We sometimes talk the same way. If an entertainer or athlete disappears and comes back strong, we can call it a rebirth. When people get a fresh start after tragedy or hardships, they feel "reborn."

Jesus means all that, but much more. True rebirth is above, from God. Everyone must be born twice. They are "born of water" in their physical birth and "born of the Spirit" in spiritual rebirth. Without it, no one can see or enter the Kingdom of God and no one will taste resurrection and renewal (3:3-6).

In all this, Jesus challenges Nicodemus. He has to stop thinking, "I'm a rabbi, you're a rabbi." Jesus and Nicodemus are not peers! He is not our peer, either. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "You should not be surprised" at this teaching (3:7). But Nicodemus is surprised and confused.

Indeed, Jesus presses harder and harder teaching on him. He drives Nicodemus – he drives us – to feel lost, at least the first time anyone hears it: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (3:8). Yes, we know the wind blows as it pleases, but how is the wind like the Spirit? No wonder that Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?" (3:9).

Jesus said, "You are Israel's teacher and you don't know these things?" (3:10). These are things everyone must know. God needs to intervene and change the heart and we must respond to the light and life He pours into us. The prophets said:

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." When God makes a new covenant with Israel, he will write his covenant and law "on their hearts and be their God" (Ezekiel 36:26, Jeremiah 31:33-34). If Israel, as a nation and one by one, will return to the Lord, he will have to renew them. God renews the heart. People should know that, but many don't. Nicodemus didn't - why not? Because he was a Pharisee.

Pharisees have confidence about themselves. They obey the law. They say things like "I thank you Lord that I am not like other men" (Luke 18:9-14). There is a spirituality that takes us away from God. They list God's laws and keep them. They make rulings – this is a sin, that isn't – and follow them

This kind of religion doesn't take sin seriously. Sin is a mistake not rebellion. And they think, "We can make up for mistakes – keep the law next time. Do good to others. Then God will be pleased. And since it's assumed that God approves of them, the Pharisee tries to ensure that men do, too – so they practice their piety for men, for neighbors, to be seen. And they drift ever farther from the Lord.

This is how righteous people "forget" that they – that we – have an absolute need of renewal, rebirth, by God's Spirit. Nicodemus didn't realize that good as he was, he had to repent. God had to renew him – a great religious leader.

Do you know this? Do you say, "I thank you that I am not like other men"? Do you say, "There but for the grace of God go I"? Same thing. Do you ever look to your works and think God will see them and be pleased? It is very common in those who don't take God seriously. Sometimes even believers think that way.

Examine ourselves: Purge the religion, the self-satisfaction and pride, the pleasure in small good deeds. It's religion – the kind that kills. If you see it in yourself, repent and root it out. Turn to Christ in humility and faith.

As a community, we need to examine ourselves collectively. Make sure we don't do anything as a church that calls attention to our deeds and activities and takes attention away from the Lord.

This year, famous English skeptic A.N. Wilson announced that he had become a Christian. How did it happen? He had abandoned the faith because the people around him mocked and scorned it, not because he had real conviction that it was false. And he went to Anglican churches where the leaders had no real convictions. But then...

"Some time over the past five or six years - I could not tell you exactly when - I found that I had changed. My belief has come about in large measure because of the lives and examples of people I have known - not the famous, not saints, but friends and relations who have lived, and faced death, in the light of the Resurrection story, [knowing] they have a future after they die."

What happened? Humanly speaking, he started spending time with genuine Christians. But lots of people do that. Spiritually speaking, he was born from above. The Spirit gave him new life. The Bible also calls it regeneration. Regeneration or new birth is an act of God. He imparts new life to a person who comes to faith as a result (2 Corinthians 5:17), Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 1:3, 1 John 2:29, 4:7, 5:1-4). As Jesus said, they "become children of God" through faith in him (John 1:12-13). Paul says the same.

“You were dead in your transgressions and sins... you followed the ways of this world... gratifying the... sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions; it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:1-10).

"Dead in transgressions" sounds harsh, but it says something important. Apart from God's grace, people are spiritually dead to God's truth. They may be interested in religion and morality, but unless God opens their eyes, genuine Christian faith may seem pointless or preposterous.

- Pointless: I don't need a crutch!
- Preposterous: Men aren't born of virgins and don't rise from the dead. It's myth.
- Pointless: I don't see why I have to believe in Jesus. Aren't all religions the same? Besides I'm a good person – what else does God want?

Dead men aren't interested in breakfast. If someone dies in the night, the aroma of bacon, coffee, buttered muffins won't stir them, even if waved under their nose. An atheist is dead in the sense that he doesn't respond to God's bacon. He may enjoy conversation about religion, but it will be as casual as the weather. He'll be a tone-deaf man at a concert. Nothing makes sense – until the Spirit renews him and he responds in faith. I believe Jesus wants to impress that on Nicodemus in his final words to him:

“I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (3:12-14).

Is that hard to understand? It's supposed to be: How is Jesus lifted up like the snake Moses lifted up in the desert? There is an answer, but it's not easy and Nicodemus needs to know that. It's not easy to grasp spiritual truth. The Spirit must quicken, give new life from above.

4. Jesus gives new life, we receive it by faith

Outsiders - Lots of outsiders, seekers and doubters go to church for a long time, trying on the faith. Does it answer the big questions? Do I believe Jesus is God's Son, that he loves me, died for me, and rose to set us right with God? Keep listening, thinking. When you feel the Lord speak to you, nudge you, yield. Tell God you will follow where the Spirit blows.

If you aren't sure where you stand with the Lord, your very uncertainty indicates some interest. If the Spirit is speaking, listen. If you feel led, yield. Pray if you can: "I don't get it all, but I believe you love me, and gave yourself for me." The Bible says we must obey the gospel. We obey it when we believe it. Paul wrote, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news. But they have not all obeyed the gospel Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?'" You see: we obey the gospel when we believe it. (Romans 10:15-16).

Concerned friends - If you have a friend who is an outsider, know this: you can't change another person's heart. You can't push, plead, or cajole someone into the kingdom. You can present the truth, and live a life that adorns the gospel. But the great matters are between God and your friend. Leave that to Him.

Mature Christians - A well-known pastor (Tom Wright) moved from one house to another and lost his birth certificate in the process. It never turned up, so he had to get another. That was inconvenient, but no one ever doubted that he was alive. There he stood! It occurred to him many believers care far too much about their birth certificate – when they were born [again], with whom, under what circumstances. Birth stories can be interesting – "It was a dark and stormy night and our doctor was on vacation." But the quality of our life, day by day, is far more important. You are *alive*; does it show? Are you following the

breath of the Spirit or following the herd and the easy path? (It's why I am so weary of the question couples ask each other – "How did you meet?" Better to ask, "Are you loving each other well?")

Mankind - Everyone needs to recognize the depths of the human problem: Our spirituality will lead to death unless God moves us from "religion" to faith. We may disobey God. Or we may obey in a spirit of pride and self-righteousness. The irreligious are far from God and the religious are, too – just like Nicodemus – unless God's Spirit moves, and we're born from above, and we listen and believe.

Believe this: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Here is a good report. Soon Nicodemus did believe. He saw that he didn't see. God's Spirit moved and John 7 and 19 show he came to faith (7:50-52, 19:38-42).

One thing remains – do you believe that God so loved this world, in all its brokenness, that He gave His one and only Son so that whoever believes, trusts, has eternal life – beginning now.