

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "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. "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.

Again and Again - March 5, 2023

John 3:1-17

Among preachers, this sermon is sometimes called, “Nick at Nite,” recalling the TV channel of the same name. The title does make some sense as the initial focus of today’s scripture is a conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was an important leader of the Jewish religion, the same Jewish religion Jesus was part of. While this conversation took place fairly early in Jesus’ ministry, he had already attracted the attention of many people and the religious authorities by means of his preaching and especially the miracles he was performing.

Jesus’ miracles had a tremendous role in bringing Him new followers. Because none of us are eyewitnesses, we are not in a position to describe scientifically what happened. The gospel writers themselves may or may not have been present, either. But that’s not the point of Jesus’ miracles and healings. They’re not so much about how things happened as who they happened to and regardless of happened, people’s lives were changed for the better and their faith increased.

Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus. Our reading says he came at night in order to discuss the healings and for Nicodemus to confess to Jesus that Jesus’ ability to do miracles and healings was obviously a sign from God. From his point of view, Nicodemus thought his was paying Jesus a great compliment. Moreover, that fact that Nicodemus even dared come to Jesus was, in his mind, a great risk. No one really knew what to make of Jesus or how to understand his teachings. For Nicodemus, a leader and teacher of Israel, to reach out to Jesus, even secretly, was a sign that Jesus was not only healing people physically with his miracles, but touching people’s minds and spirits with his words. In short, Jesus was a mystery to Nicodemus and Nicodemus wanted to find out more.

I’m not sure what Nicodemus was expecting to hear during the course of their conversation, but it certainly was not Jesus’ assertion that his followers experienced not one, but two births.

Jesus said all of us experienced birth through water, the physical process of our coming into the world. He may also have meant that his followers had been baptized in water as a kind of spiritual cleansing. But Jesus also said, that for people to truly understand him and his message they needed to experience a second kind of birth or rebirth. The words Jesus uses according to John’s Gospel can be translated two ways. Jesus said his followers must be “born again” or, the more correct translation from the original Greek language is “born from above.”

Now Jesus’ telling Nicodemus that he had to experience some new kind of birth experience, whether it was called “born again” or “born from above” was well beyond Nicodemus’ understanding. But that’s not surprising because the term “born again” as in “born again Christian” is still badly misunderstood today. Sadly, the misunderstanding of what it means to be “born again” in the way Jesus intends it has caused not only major divisions in the church, but also made many believers and especially

nonbelievers to view Christians as arrogant, judgmental people whose actions and words seem to have nothing to do with the Jesus they say they worship.

Let's talk about what Jesus meant when he said his followers must be born again, or more correctly, born from above.

In trying to explain to Nicodemus what his message was about, Jesus was trying to disabuse Nicodemus — as he is trying to disabuse us — of the idea that following Him is a matter of praying the right prayers in the right way, following certain rules and customs, and basically doing what the leadership tells you to do. In other words, many people assume that if you play the game the right way you will win God's favor. Mess up and, of course, it's all over for you.

There are many Jews, along with many Christians, who see their journey with Jesus as a purely external experience: follow the rules and customs of the church and you're OK with God. To many people, the main role of people like me, with our fancy robes and other trappings, is to be "God's police force." We are the ones who enforce God's rules and tell people how to live.

Well, that's not how I see myself (and I hope you don't see me that way, either!) The last thing I seek to be is God's policeman.

That's why the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus seems strange. Jesus meant something quite different from what Nicodemus heard. When Nicodemus heard Jesus tell him he had to be born again, he thought Jesus was telling him that he somehow, as an adult, had to reenter his mother's womb and be physically reborn — an obviously impossible event!

What Jesus meant was that all of us need to be reborn, but our rebirth is a birth from above. In other words, to follow Jesus, as Jesus intends for us to follow him, we do not need a physical rebirth, but a spiritual one.

Spiritual, not physical. There's that word again, spirituality. You know, this church stuff would be so much easier if it were simply a matter of showing up every so often, having communion once and awhile, saying a few prayers now and then, and putting some money in the plate. Then, as many assume, we'll have paid the premium on our insurance policy with God and everything will be OK.

Moreover, there are others, indeed many, who do associate the words born again with a spiritual experience, but it is strictly a once-in-a-lifetime event. Many people who call themselves "born again Christians" can point to an exact time, a specific moment, when they had a special, powerful encounter with God and felt that Jesus himself directly touched or even crashed into their lives.

I do to an extent understand such thinking. I do appreciate that many "born again Christians" have experienced a "something" that cannot be easily explained in human words. I had such an experience

myself when I felt called to be a pastor. Yet frankly, having a spiritual experience is exactly what Nicodemus could not understand.

I mean, how could he? Nicodemus, like so many Jews and Christians who came after him, viewed and still view their relationship with God in the same way we view our relationship with the government. We pay our taxes, the government provides services, and we otherwise leave each other alone. "Me and God," many say, "we've got an agreement." When pressed about the nature of the agreement, they just say, "Oh, we know." Meaning, of course, there is no such "agreement" because if such people really had an "agreement" with God, they would be happy to talk about it. Instead, they just mainly get annoyed and tell us to go away.

Of course, being born again, in the sense of understanding faith as having a sudden, isolated encounter with God, isn't much better. When people declare themselves as being born again, when people tell of their "conversion experience," they often understand it as achieving a goal they can check off the old bucket list. They think that because they have had a spiritual encounter with God, everything is forever OK between God and themselves. Like those who see their relationship with God as an occasional give-and-take exchange, many "born again Christians" feel that because they have had a momentous experience, all is well between them and God both now and forever.

The problem with such an attitude, I fear, is that many, far too many "born again Christians" instead of reacting with great sense of humility that the Creator of the Universe has reached out to them, they brag, they boast about their experience. Too many "born again Christians" have convinced themselves that they are now insiders and have a direct path to heaven. They see themselves as the ones on the inside, and the rest of the world as on the outside. I didn't know that human beings had the power to pronounce themselves worthy of God. I thought only Jesus could do that. Worst of all, many people proclaim themselves as "saved" and love to declare how special and wonderful they are, as opposed to the rest of the world. Is it any wonder that many people avoid the Church in general and Christians in particular?

The problem for many, even if they have had a genuine, meaningful, life-changing encounter with God is that it is not the end of one's spiritual journey. It is not even the highlight of one's spiritual journey. Instead, it is only the beginning. Unfortunately, because so many are mistaken about how they understand their being born again, they rudely and falsely judge and condemn other people who do not share their particular point of view.

That is why Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs not to be "born again" but instead, "born from above."

Being born from above, as opposed to being born again, implies not a once for all time unique encounter with God, but a permanent change in how we think, live, and act toward God, toward

others, and even toward ourselves. Jesus did heal people. Jesus did transform people's physical lives. Jesus performed miracles that we don't quite understand with plenty of witnesses to back up the claim something happened. But Jesus performed these signs and healings not to show off, but to demonstrate that God's love and God's power was a work in the world and at work in us.

The point of our realizing that in Christ we are born from above is that we increasingly change the way we live our lives to place God in Jesus Christ fully in charge — and that for some may seem scary. Spirituality is, believe it or not, is what the church is all about. We call ourselves the “Body of Christ” both in the sense that we on this earth individually represent Jesus' actual body by literally working in the world in much the same way that he did his work. Body also means a group of people with a common purpose. When we say that we are born from above, we place ourselves personally in the position of being both. We are filled and very much aware of God's Holy Spirit coming into us and leading us to say and do extraordinary and mundane things for others — imitating Jesus as he went about doing his earthly ministry. Moreover, we are collectively inspired as the Church Universal and as individual congregations to spread the Good News to our friends, families, and communities. Thus being born from above is our awareness of the constant presence of God in our lives. It's not just a once in a lifetime event as many born again Christians believe. It's not simply an imaginary reciprocal bargain, as others believe. Friends, the relationship Jesus desires to have with us is permanent, life changing, and will empower us to be the women and men God created us to be. It's the only pathway forward.

The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus all culminates in this statement: “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. “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. Notice that I said not only John 3:16, the part that starts, “For God so loved the world... but also verse 17, which explains Jesus is not here to condemn us, but to save us! Somehow, that verse is overlooked.

These two taken together mean Jesus longs to be in a forever, personal, intense relationship with every single one of us. Not from a distance, as some believe, or even in a one and done encounter as many to claim to be born again believe. Jesus loves you and wants to be with you every hour, every minute, every day because when that happens, when the bond between Jesus and us becomes inseparable, then we will truly have been born from above. And then, then, then look out because we, too, will work in, love in, and interact with the world the same way Jesus did. Fear will be gone, faith will take over and Jesus will live through us.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.