

“New Birth, New Sight”

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John 3:1-17

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.

BORN OKAY THE FIRST TIME

A bumper sticker read,
“Born okay the first time.”
I laughed when I heard about that bumper sticker.

Some of you might find that bumper sticker a bit puzzling, but it made perfect sense to me.

You see, when I was growing up, someone was always asking me,

“Have you been saved?
Have you been born again?”

These were very important questions in the church of my youth.

And no matter how many times you said “yes” to those questions; the urgent evangelist would continue to press his or her case.

“If you died tonight,
would you go to heaven?
Are you sure?”

Of course, when you’re a teenager,
you’re not sure of anything.

So, we got baptized and sometimes re-baptized.
We rededicated our life again and again.
We attended numerous youth conferences and revival meetings.

And the questions were always the same.

“Have you been saved?
Have you been born again?
If you were to die tonight...”

But, in my junior year of college,
I began to wonder if these were the only questions worth asking.

In fact all this emphasis upon my personal salvation
...seemed a bit selfish and one dimensional.

More than that, I was beginning to read the Bible for myself (always a dangerous exercise),
and I noticed that God as revealed in the prophets and in Jesus was interested in a lot more than just one person's salvation.

God wanted to establish a new kingdom,
a kingdom based upon justice and righteousness.

And what the prophets and Jesus wanted us to do was catch a vision of this new kingdom.

In verse 3 of today's lesson we learn
that this is the whole point of being “born again” or being “born from above”.

Jesus told Nicodemus,
“Very truly, I tell you,
no one can see the kingdom of God
without being born from above.”

EYES TO SEE

What is the point of being born from above or born again?

So that we can see the kingdom of God.

The evangelists of my youth were correct.
Salvation is important.

But, the Bible talks about salvation in a different way.
The Bible talks about salvation with a capital "S".
God is out to save the world, the whole world.

And if we want to be a part of that,
we need to see more clearly.
We need to be given "eyes to see".

It's like being born again.

Have you ever noticed how many stories in the gospels are about the blind people being enabled to see?

Those were miracles with a purpose.

Quite often, after the blind person was enabled to see, Jesus would follow that up by criticizing faithless religious leaders.

He would say,
"You guys are the ones who are really blind!"

We preachers and seminary graduates don't like someone telling us,

"You don't know a thing about religion.
You are like the blind leading the blind."

But, that's what Jesus said to religious leaders again and again.

Today's lesson is an example of that.

IN THE DARK

Nicodemus, a religious leader and a Pharisee came to Jesus.

He thought that Jesus was a Rabbi, a great teacher chosen by God. But, he couldn't make heads or tails out of what Jesus was telling him.

Finally in exasperation Jesus said,
"Are you a teacher of Israel,
and yet you don't understand these things?"

Sometimes I feel like Nicodemus.
I'm a religious leader.
But, it's almost as if I hear Jesus asking me this question.

"You call yourself a preacher,
and yet you do not understand these things?"

"Well, no, Jesus...sometimes I don't understand

I do know that some of the things I have done in the past in the name of Jesus may not have been so Christlike. And so I have become very suspicious of my ability to really understand what Jesus has to say.

Maybe that's the beginning of wisdom.

The Bible tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus "by night".

And that's how we all come to Jesus.
We come by night because we too are in the dark when it come to kingdom of God.

We are blind and cannot see.
Recognizing our own blindness might be the first step of faith.

DOC WATSON

Recently, I read a book entitled, "Blind But Now I See". It was about a man named Doc Watson.

Doc Watson was a great guitar player,
and a person of faith.

But, Doc was blind from birth.

His whole life was in a way, dedicated to being able to do what a sighted person could do.

When he was a child, he was a daredevil and tried to do everything the other boys would do, even when it often endangered his life.

As an adult he was able to wire his whole house for electricity... and it passed inspection!

He would have preferred to have been a mechanic, to work with his hands. But, nobody wanted to hire a blind mechanic.

So Doc learned to play the guitar, really well. He developed a unique style of flat picking that even amazed professional guitarists.

But, no matter how hard he tried to overcome his blindness it was a cruel and overwhelming reality.

Doc would often sing Amazing Grace,
and there was not a dry eye in the house
when a blind man would sing in his clear baritone voice,

“I was blind but now I see.”

Doc wanted to see so badly, and yet that was the one gift that he would never be given, at least not in this life.

Knowing this, when Doc was on his death bed, some of his musician friends went to the hospital and sang Amazing Grace during his last hours.

“I was blind but now I see.”

ONLY GOD CAN MAKE US SEE

There are some things that we cannot do for ourselves.

Only Jesus could heal some things

Only Jesus could make the blind see.
Only Jesus could make the lame walk.
Only Jesus could make the leper clean.

But, it was always about more than just certain individuals healed long ago.

Those miracles were a sign of the kingdom that comes.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, it sounds like a ridiculous idea.

And Nicodemus says as much.

I was born okay the first time, thank you very much.
I don't believe any of us can climb back in the womb for a second go around.

I don't believe the leopard can change his spots.
I don't believe the blind can see.

Most of the time that's true.

But, what if God wanted to make the blind see?
The lame walk and the leper clean?
Could that happen?

Is anything too hard for God?
Could God even make a second birth possible?
Yes, he could.

THE WIND

But, that's Jesus and not us.
There are many things that we can't control.

For example,
Can we control the wind?
Don't think so.

Last September when hurricane Irma blew through this area, and we learned the lesson again.

The wind blows where it will.
We have no control over the wind.

And the same is true when it come to those who are born of the Spirit.

No one chooses to be born.

The choices are made for us before we come into this world.

We can't choose to be born again.

That's another one of those decisions above our pay grade.

It's a decision God makes for us.

God chooses us out of pure grace.

One preacher put it this way,

"...the limits of salvation, whatever they are,
are known only to God and determined solely by God.

...Salvation is unearned.

Works righteousness a foolish notion.

Our making a decision for Christ pure hubris."

Jesus told his disciples,

"You did not choose me, but I chose you."

(John 15:16)

For a person like me who grew up under the terrible scrutiny of questions like:

"Are you saved?

Have you been born again?"

...Understanding the radical grace of God was like being born again.

It was like a breath of fresh air.

It was like being blind and then being able to see.

It gave me an opportunity to serve God out of gratitude instead of compulsion and fear.

And that insight was the beginning of a call to be a minister in the Presbyterian Church.

SON OF GOD

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.

That seems appropriate because Nicodemus was in the dark about Jesus.

He couldn't see who he was.

Nicodemus thought that Jesus was a rabbi,
another teacher who would lay down the law
....rules and regulations that would define the good life.

But, Nicodemus was wrong about that.
Jesus was the Son of God.

Jesus wasn't from God.
Jesus was of God.
Jesus was the Word made flesh.

Nicodemus couldn't see that.
He just had a vision problem.
He couldn't see that the kingdom of God come to earth was standing right
there in front of him.

But, this is not the end of the story.

Nicodemus was led by the Spirit to seek Jesus that night long ago.

And apparently what Jesus told him began to open his eyes.

When the religious authorities wanted to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus stood
and said,

"Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find
out what they are doing, does it?"

Nicodemus' question on Jesus' behalf was immediately put down by the re-
ligious authorities.

They asked Nicodemus,
"So, are you from Galilee too?"

Look it up in the Bible.
There is no prophet that comes from Galilee.”
(John 7:50)

But, I suspect even the threats of the religious authorities did not stop Nicodemus from speaking up for Jesus.

Things were changing in Nicodemus' life.

And when the time of Jesus' burial comes,
Nicodemus, the one who came to Jesus by night,
joins Joseph of Arimathea in the light of day to honor Jesus with a decent burial.

He brings expensive spices to anoint the body.
And Nicodemus and Joseph take Jesus' body to a nearby tomb.

Apparently Nicodemus had come to see Jesus differently.

He was willing to risk everything to follow him in life and in death.

I wonder.
What got into Nicodemus?
It's almost like he's a different person.

Born again?
Sounds like it.

CAN YOU SEE?

One commentator suggests that when we ask,
“Are you saved?” we're asking the wrong question.

The question shouldn't be “Are you saved?”
The question should be “Can you see?”

Have you seen those drawings that can be seen two different ways?

In one of the famous ones, if you look at the image one way, you see an old woman.

And if you look at the image another way, you see a young woman.

We know both images are there, but usually we can only recognize one or the other.

And if we try to force ourselves to see the other image it usually doesn't work,
and we get frustrated.

But, if we're patient,
if we continue to look,
sometimes we are able to see the other image.

It's almost as if the image appears out of nowhere.

It was there the whole time,
but our eyes have to be opened.

I think this is what it's like to be a disciple of Jesus.
We tend to view Jesus in only one way.
And that prevents us from really seeing him.

But, if we continue to look,
a new image begins to form.

It was there all along.
We just needed eyes to see.
We just needed the birth that comes from above.

TRINITY SUNDAY

Today is Trinity Sunday.
Today is the day when we sing Holy, Holy, Holy.
God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Blessed Trinity.

So what does Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus have to do with the Trinity?

You may have noticed that in this story we have reference to God, the Son of God, and the Spirit.

And so the details of this story give us some insight into the doctrine of the Trinity.

Often people have asked me,
“Why is the doctrine of the Trinity so important?
It’s so confusing.”

The technical, philosophical, theological descriptions of the doctrine of the Trinity are precise.
But they can also be confusing.

There’s a lot that we can’t know about God.
And when we try to understand God on our own terms, we often throw up our hands and say, “I give up.”

But, we don’t need to do that.

We know God because God has chosen to reveal Himself in his Word and especially in his Son Jesus.

As it was with Nicodemus,
when we meet Jesus,
it helps us see God more clearly.

It puts us on a different path in life.

What is God like?
Jesus tells us.

Just as God saved the children of Israel in the wilderness, so God saves us through Jesus.

God in Christ forgives us and provides for our salvation.

God doesn’t want to condemn us.
That’s not why God sent his Son into the world.

God loves us and wants to save us.

We might not be able to see that right now.
But, God has that covered as well.

The Spirit of God,
the Wind that made all winds that blow,
will come into our life.

And it will be like we were born again.
It will be like we were blind and now we can see.

It's time to sing.

Holy, Holy, Holy.
God in three persons.
Blessed Trinity.

Amen.

The question for us on this Trinity Sunday is not: Are you saved? But rather: Do you see? What we see reveals if we have indeed been born again and how we describe Jesus, and therefore how we understand ourselves, makes our new vision evident to others. Rabbi, teacher from God, Son of God, Messiah, Lord of all, my Lord and Savior, the one for whom I will stand even at the risk of losing my closest allies and friends, even at the risk of my own life because I am not only or primarily a religious leader, but a follower of Jesus Christ. Born OK the first time, but through the water and the Spirit born again, now able to see the kingdom of God right in front of me, all around us, never absent from us. Everything to see, here.

This week:

- 1 Have you ever been asked if you were born again or when were you saved? How did you respond? What is the value of thinking of salvation as incumbent upon our making a conscious decision to follow Jesus? What is the theological danger in that approach?
- 2 In our Reformed understanding that salvation is through grace alone, faith alone, do we risk losing accountability for our actions and the way we live? If there are risks to understanding "personal salvation"

as reliant on our making a choice, what are the theological hazards of election and predestination?

- 3 How does your faith in Jesus Christ make a difference in your daily living? Is it evident that you have been born by water and the Spirit?
- 4 Have you experienced a radical experience of "new seeing"? A conversion experience? What happened? How did your life change as a result?
- 5 Nicodemus is named three times in John's Gospel: the text appointed for Trinity Sunday, again in chapter 7:50-51 and finally in chapter 19:39-42. Read each of these passages. What do you make of these descriptions of Nicodemus? Do you see a progression in his understanding of who Jesus is? How has your understanding of Jesus evolved?
- 6 How does this text from John inform your understanding of the Trinity?