

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, March 01, 2020 – Lent 1
Hymns: 96 – Let us with a gladsome mind; Jesus, Draw Me Close;
571 – Lord, I want to be a Christian
Scripture: John 3:1-21
Sermon: “ReBorn Into The Light”

John 3:1-21 NLT

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. “Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”

Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

“How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked.

Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things? I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won’t believe our testimony. But if you don’t believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

“There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.”

Nicodemus could represent what we consider to be the respected, successful, self-made man. He was a Pharisee, which meant he was religious from the way he combed his hair to the way he pulled on his socks in the morning. He never missed a service. He was a highly regarded member of the community, a pillar of Jewish life and law, a ruler over the people. He was a good man, both in his own estimation, and in the opinion of all who knew him. And so, Nicodemus figured that he had done all that was required of him; that when God looked at Nicodemus, Nicodemus supposed that God liked what God saw. That when God established his Kingdom on earth, Nicodemus, having checked all the boxes, would be front of the line.

Not only that, but for a Pharisee, Nicodemus was pretty open-minded. Having heard the stories flying around Jerusalem about Jesus, Nicodemus figured it was time he had a look for himself, first-hand. Rather than automatically assuming that Jesus, being from a different religious party, was wrong (in the same way that an Island Conservative would automatically assume an Island Liberal was wrong about – well about pretty well everything, and vice-versa), Nicodemus treated Jesus with respect, and a willingness to listen.

“Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

And Jesus takes a good look at Nicodemus, and, in the way Jesus has, sees right into Nicodemus’ heart, sees his good intentions, sees his religious observances, sees it all. And Jesus sees, too, what’s not there. He sees something missing at the very core of Nicodemus’ soul.

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

Born again. To be reborn from above. To be reborn of the Spirit. What Nicodemus needed was a new start, a new heart, a new life, the kind of life which only God can give. *“Because,”* said Jesus, *“natural efforts give birth to natural things, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”* We can only get so far on our own. And it isn’t far enough. We need to be recreated, and it takes the Creator to do that.

“Born again? What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. *“How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”*

Obviously, Nicodemus hadn't a clue what Jesus was getting at, here, and fair enough, because if someone asks us point-blank what it means to be born again, what

it really means, we'd have a hard time too. So, Jesus brought Nicodemus – and us - right back to square one, right to the root of the problem. And it is this: We are broken. There is something within us, something not right, something off, something dark, something forever pulling us in the wrong direction, and all our religion and all our good deeds and all our tolerance and political correctness and good reputation can paper over the problem but can never really solve, never really heal it. Our spirit – that which connects us with God, and with God's life and light and hope and truth – our spirit lies dormant within us, silent, still-born, starving for light, and it is only the Spirit of God which can bring it to birth, can bring it to life.

And so Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.'"

And if you're still a bit lost about all this, don't feel bad. Nicodemus is right there with you: "*How are these things possible?*" Nicodemus asked.

It's hard for us to understand. Like Nicodemus, we're hopelessly focussed on the externals of our life. But Jesus identifies our problem as internal. We're fixated on the earthly. Jesus, as he explains to Nicodemus, speaks to us of the heavenly. We're generally willing to do the things in life required to please others and to make sure we're OK with God. Jesus tells us that we actually need to start from scratch. To be recreated. To be reborn. To become people of the Spirit, the people of light, the people who, through faith, live in and through and by and with the love of God.

Jesus can sense Nicodemus still scratching his head. So he makes it as plain as he can (John 3:16-21 NIRV):

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world. He sent his Son to save the world through him. Anyone who believes in him is not judged. But anyone who does not believe is judged already. They have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Here is the judgment: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. They loved darkness because what they did was evil. Everyone who does evil deeds hates the light. They will not come into the light. They are afraid that what they do will be seen. But anyone who

lives by the truth comes into the light. They live by the truth with God's help, doing what God wants in a way that all can see.

You know, we aren't told whether the light came on for Nicodemus then and there, or if he and Jesus spoke further that night, or if Nicodemus followed Jesus into the countryside to hear and see more of this puzzling man. We do know, from John, that when others of the Pharisee religious party were ready to condemn Jesus, Nicodemus spoke up on Jesus' behalf, demanding a fair trial. And we also know that it was Nicodemus who helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial. Interestingly, though, John describes Nicodemus as "*the one who had visited Jesus,*" while describing Joseph as "*a disciple of Jesus.*" Nicodemus, still focussed on the externals – a fair trial for the accused, a proper burial for the condemned. But did he ever come to believe? Or did he never really understand?

And so, for the Nicodemuses among us – for those of us who are trying to do good, to do right, but ultimately to do it on our own, and avoid anything as drastic as being born again, being reborn from above by the Spirit of God – for the Nicodemuses among us, let me try to explain why the externals just aren't enough; let me tell the story this way.

You see, Nicodemus, in the beginning, humanity and God were together, as one, creator and creation in harmony, at peace. But we wanted to live on our terms, do things our way, strike out on our own. But on our own, we were lost. On our own, we wandered, more or less deliberately, as far from God as possible. On our own, we were interested in satisfying ourselves, but being apart from God, found ourselves never satisfied, ever wanting more. On our own we were disoriented, afraid and purposeless. We forgot that we were family. We forgot that we were loved. Rather than turning to God and one another, we turned against God, we turned against one another, and our story became one of suffering, of war, of hatred, of death. Our world became a strange and hostile place. The light of God's love for us was forgotten; darkness filled our world, filled our minds, filled our hearts.

And in the midst of our darkness came Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was more than a birth of mysterious circumstances. Jesus Christ was more than a carpenter's son. He was more than a good man, more than a storyteller, more than a teacher. Jesus Christ was the very Son of God. God in our midst. God amongst us. God, here and now, on our terms, in our form. God, explaining himself to us, explaining ourselves to us, healing us, helping us, loving us, bringing us back to the light. Jesus was nothing less than God's light, God's love,

made flesh and bone and blood, sharing God's message with all who would hear. And what is that message?

That God still loves us. He yearns to forgive us and bring us back to Himself. He wants to fill our lives with meaning and purpose right now, a life that will continue on in God's coming Kingdom, free forever from the pain and sorrow and death of this world.

The Good News is that God has done everything possible to bring us together with Himself. He did this in a way that staggers our imagination. In God's plan, by His death on the Cross, Jesus Christ paid the price for our sins, for our rebellion. Jesus took the judgment of God that we deserve upon Himself, when He died on the Cross. Now, by His resurrection from the dead, Christ has broken the power of death. We, too, by the power of Christ, shall live again.

The resurrection also confirms for all time that Jesus was in fact who He said He was: the unique Son of God, sent from Heaven to save us from our sins. Now God freely offers us the gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

Finally, the message of Jesus is about our response. Like any other gift, God's gift of salvation does not become ours until we accept it and make it our own. God has done everything possible to provide salvation. But we must reach out in faith and accept the gift of new life God offers. How do we do this?

First, by acknowledging to ourselves and confessing to God that we have done wrong, we have failed, and are in need of His forgiveness; we are broken, in ways that we ourselves cannot fix. We need to determine within ourselves and confess to God that we want to turn from our old life, our old ways, and start forgiven, afresh, anew.

Second, we accept God's gift of new life by committing our lives to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. To call Jesus Saviour and Lord is to recognise that our salvation, our forgiveness, comes from him, and that we respond by following him, living as he calls us to live, in forgiveness, in fellowship, in service, in love. God in His grace invites us to receive His Son into our lives today.

If you have never done so, I invite you to open your life to Jesus Christ. God receives us just as we are. No matter who we are or what we have done, we are saved only because of what Christ has done for us. I will not go to Heaven because I am a minister, or because I read my Bible, or because I am in church every Sunday

(good though those things are). I will go to Heaven for one reason: Jesus Christ died for me, and I am trusting Him alone for my salvation, following him as Lord. Christ gave himself for you also, and He freely offers you the gift of eternal life as you commit yourself to Him.

When you do, you become a child of God, adopted into His family forever. The Spirit of God fills you with new life, and will begin to change you from within, bringing life to your spirit and hope to your heart. No one who truly gives his or her life to Christ will ever be the same, for God's promise is sure: *"If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"*

It is possible to live like Nicodemus; a good person, a good reputation, religious, interested in Jesus, even regarding Jesus as sent from God; yet still, never truly inviting him to be your Saviour and Lord; never taking that step into the light, that leap of faith into new life. It's possible to rely on your own goodness to please God, and to hold Jesus at arm's length. It's possible, but it's not, and can never be, good enough. It wasn't for Nicodemus. It won't be for you.

Stop going through the motions. Begin by believing. And if believing is a problem, ask God to help you believe. The very desire is a sign that the Spirit of God moves within you. Ask God to change your heart, to change your life. Open your life to Christ today. By the power of God, be reborn into the light. And start living – really living – with Him. Amen.

Let us pray:

Dear God, I realise I've been going through the motions. I've never made that step of making Jesus my Saviour and Lord. Or maybe I did, but it was so long ago, or perhaps that light which once shone so brightly has now, in my life, grown dim. Either way, I've been relying on myself, my own goodness, my reputation, my religion, as a substitute for new life, for new birth, for a life lived with your Spirit within.

Father, it's time. I believe. Forgive me. Fill me with your Spirit. Make me new. Make me yours. Help me to follow your Son, each and every day of my life. May the light of your love shine through all I do. Amen.