

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Nicodemus and Me”
John 3:1-16
February 17, 2008: The Second Sunday of Lent

There is a question that I’ve been asked a handful of times in the last five to ten years. And every time it comes up, I get a little restless, a little uncomfortable. Partly because I don’t know how I should answer (because I’m not sure exactly what they mean when they’re asking) and partly because I used to ask this question myself.

The question is, of course, “Are you born again?”

And what’s funny about this question is, you don’t ever ask someone you know well. Typically it comes up in conversation with someone you’ve just met sitting next to you in an airplane or a coffee shop or on a couch at a friend’s party.

And what’s worse is when it is followed by, “Because if not, I can tell you how to be!”

That’s the point where my cynicism and false-self takes over. Immediately I start thinking, “Oh really? You are going to tell me how it be born again? You know nothing about me, who I am, where I’ve been. And as simple as $1+2=3$, you’re going to explain to me the deep mysteries of God and salvation?”

Of course, my mom taught me better than that and so I fumble around with my words a little and shyly say, “Yes. I am.” I almost say, “or at least I want to be,” but I’m afraid that this would only extend an already awkward moment and *we’d end up with a picture of a stick man on a napkin, walking across a bridge between two cliffs, the bridge, of course, being a cross.* So, I keep that last part to myself and politely listen to what this new friend has to say next.

Born again. We’ve made a big deal out of the phrase haven’t we? As much as it has dominated our speech about salvation, you might think it is scattered all over the New Testament. But it’s not...

Of all the talk in the New Testament about salvation, of all that Jesus said to people and did, did you know this scripture is the only place where this phrase is used? It is only one picture, one image of the mystery of salvation. But, we sure like it, don’t we? And so we’ve taken this strange, provocative idea and made it a tool in our so-called “fishing belt.”

What Jesus is saying here, isn’t as simple as we might like to think. Remember, Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council. And he wasn’t like those hard-headed Pharisees we typically think of. *His first recorded words are a confession of faith. He says to Jesus, “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God.”* He was a religious leader for the people of God, but he doesn’t seem to get it. Why are we so sure we do?

In John’s gospel, Jesus is the Wisdom of God, made flesh, revealing the very nature of God. So Jesus comes with these wisdom sayings that can be difficult to grasp... I guess because God is not one easily grasped.

That’s one of the catch-22s about God. He is being revealed but never fully seen. He is immanent, dwelling in and among us, and yet transcendent, beyond all knowing. God is and has been making himself known, but he is a deep mystery, so much more than we can know.

So if you think you “get it” or “get Him” or have this “faith thing” or “Christian thing” figured out... you’re probably missing it. There’s a lot more here than we realize.

That’s what makes us like Nicodemus. He does have some kind of faith when he says that Jesus is from God. But in the darkness of night, there is more there sitting in front of him than he can see... and there’s more sitting in front of us than we realize.

Just before this passage, John tells us that there were many who believed in Jesus... who, “believed in his name,” because of the signs he was doing. But then John says something really interesting. “Jesus would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, he knew what was in them.” The chapter break makes us miss this, but the very next words are, “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus...”

Nicodemus comes as an example of one who is open and seeking God. He has immersed his life in the Jewish faith and law. He’s done everything that his religious system has told him to do... but deep within him, he knows there must be something more.

And this is just the beginning for Nicodemus. He is on his way... *trying to understand, seeking... asking... but he just doesn’t see it.*

And Jesus says to him, “No one can *see* the Kingdom of God without being born again.” And of course this word, “see” is really important. In John’s gospel there is a lot of talk about light and dark, and Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, in the dark, and Jesus talks to him about seeing the Kingdom of God...

And I wonder, are we trying to see the kingdom of God while we’re sitting in the dark?

Later Jesus changes the phrase. In verse 5 he says that you must be born of the spirit to *enter* the Kingdom of God. So he’s talking about seeing and entering the Kingdom of God.

And that’s another interesting phrase that might catch your eye. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus is constantly talking about the Kingdom of God, what it is, what it’s like, and where it can be found. But in John this is the only place that we find the phrase “the Kingdom of God.”

So, as commonplace and simple as we’ve made this passage, there’s not much common or simple about it. *It is a little more mysterious than a stick man walking across a bridge on a napkin.*

The problem is, we’ve made this all about “getting saved” – which Jesus doesn’t mention – one moment of conversion... and we like to categorize, don’t we? For some reason we feel this need to make clear **judgments about each other, about who is in and who is out.**

But, we don’t get to choose. It’s not our role to make those kinds of delineations. We don’t get to decide where the kingdom of God is and where it isn’t. The wind blows where it pleases, Jesus says... and so does Spirit, so it’s not exactly up to you or to the person sitting next to you on a plane or in a coffee shop or at a friend’s party.

And that is hard for us. We so like to define and create systems. Even us moderates, who pride ourselves on being open-minded... we still like to categorize, we still have our boundaries. We like to think we know, even if our knowing is open... because we’d like to be the judge and it helps us to feel in control, like we are on the inside.

Don’t get me wrong here. *Boundaries are important. Doctrine matters, but that doesn’t mean we get to choose where the Spirit is blowing...*

or how much you have to know or do...

or have correct theology to be born again.

It’s not up to us, as much as we’d like it to be. No wonder Jesus wouldn’t “entrust himself to them.” He knows what’s in their hearts... He knows what’s in our hearts.

But Jesus tells Nicodemus and tells us that where the Spirit blows, there is new birth.

For a lot of us here at DaySpring, we don’t have to look too far back when we start thinking about birth. I’ve been in the maternity ward of the hospital more times in the last year than my entire life combined... and only one of those times was for Noelle. There are a few things I’ve been learning about birth. One is, *no two births are the same.* As much as we try to describe and define stages of labor, it’s not that clear cut and predictable. As much as we try to describe and define salvation, it’s not that clear cut and predictable.

The other thing I've learned is that no matter what kind of modern medicine you are using, *there's no such thing as an easy birth!* I'm sure the ladies will agree. So I think we need to be mindful of where Jesus is taking us here. He says you can't see the Kingdom of God unless you go through another birth... and births are always messy and painful.

In verse 13 he suggests there must be a descending before there is an ascending...
there is a painful process that must be entered into...
there is a descending, a willingness to let go of control...
to see yourself for who you really are, to see reality as it is...
as painful and as messy as that may be.
There must be this descending before there can be ascending.

And I guess this is why we read this passage during Lent. We are walking toward the cross; with Jesus, we are fixing our gaze towards Jerusalem.

Somehow being born again is connected to our gazing at Jesus upon the cross. He says he's like the snake in the wilderness that Moses held up. I'm sure you all remember that story from Numbers. If you were bit by one of those poisonous snakes, you had to gaze upon the snake Moses lifted up in order to live. In the same way, we must gaze upon the Son of Man in order to live...

in order to move through the pain of the birth canal... to take our first breath of life...
in order to *open our eyes* to the fullness... and beauty of a world that we never knew existed.

The Son of Man must be lifted up... like the serpent in the wilderness. We look at him and believe in him to have eternal life.

Jesus is a window for us... a window into the deeper truth... about who God is... about who we are... about the mystery of creation.

But we are afraid to look too closely... We're afraid that we might start to see *how radical this God is... how dangerous it can be to become like him*. When we're born again we see that the Kingdom of God is a demanding place that calls us to let go of everything... like Abram being called to go to a land that God will show him... who knows where?

God calls us to a land where we... let go of our pride, our fears, our anxieties, our need for control and security. A land that God will show us, but to get there we must let go of our very lives. And this is not an easy task. Letting go is a struggle and often painful... much like a baby being born.

In the gospel of John, Jesus' Death, Resurrection, and Ascension are one event. We can't separate them or emphasize one to the neglect of the others. Jesus being lifted up is the tragedy of the Crucifixion, the shock of the Resurrection, and the glory of the Ascension.

This is the Paschal Mystery. Through the pain and crying, and work and struggle of this birth we awaken to new life... and slowly we begin to see the Kingdom of God... it begins to come into focus.

Then we are seeing with new eyes, *like those of a child who lives in an enchanted world. But it takes their imagination to see the enchanted world*. With our sophisticated adult intelligence, we try to explain to them that their imaginary friend isn't there, that there are no monsters in the closet, and that they can't really fly. And our children fight against this because they know that we can't see what they can see... they know we are blinded by all that we have so confidently learned in school and learned in books and learned in life... as we have grown up and moved past those foolish things.

Like a child's eyes, our spiritual eyes help us see the reality beyond the concrete in front of us... beyond the closed doors, beyond the impossibilities, beyond the mundane. To look with new eyes is to see a world "full of wonders, a world in which nothing is simply what it seems because everything is packed with endless possibilities. It's a

matter of learning to see the world, each other and ourselves as God sees us, and to live as if God's reality were the only one that mattered."¹

When we have these eyes, when we begin to see, when we are born of the Spirit, we can enter the Kingdom of God; we can participate. *Because we begin to see that we are partners with "the God of all possibilities."*

Entering the kingdom of God doesn't mean that you change your job... although it can mean that. It doesn't necessarily mean that you change your location or who you are... although it did for Abram.

Entering the Kingdom of God means that you begin to understand yourself as God's person in and for the world.

It means that whether your hands are changing diapers, or the oil in your car, or grading papers, or balancing accounts...

*"Your hands are claimed by God in your baptism for God's work in the world."*²

But to enter, you have to see, and to see, you have to have new eyes, and Nicodemus didn't have those eyes... at least not at this point in the story. But he is on his way... He'll show up again about half way through the John and try to be the voice of reason with the Pharisees. Then he makes his final appearance at the cross... where he brings the spices to care for Jesus' dead body.

Nicodemus is on a journey in this gospel. The gospel of John is about a pilgrimage that we all have to make, from inadequate faith in this itinerate preacher and miracle worker, to full faith in the Son of Man who is lifted up, who is crucified, resurrected on the third day, and ascended into heaven.

As Nicodemus moves towards the cross he begins to see much more than a two-dimensional stick man on a napkin. Nicodemus begins to see how great is the Father's love for us... and he begins to see the realities of the Kingdom of God.

So as we make this Lenten journey, may we fix your eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith. As we work and struggle down this Lenten road with our Christ, may we feel the wind blowing across our face... and perhaps, perhaps we'll begin to see with new eyes. Amen.

*For God so love the world... for God so loved the whole world... for God so loved you and me... that He gave his only Son, not to condemn the world, but he gave his only Son that whoever would believe in him and through him might not perish... but have life... full, abundant, and everlasting.
Amen.*

"You do not die on a cross in order to 'set up' the resurrection; you die on a cross because the willingness to give it all away is itself the original and ultimate creative act from which all being flows." -- Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening.

¹ Barbra Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, 42, 44.

² Ibid., 32.