

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Timothy Haughton
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Being Made New

Jesus said: “You must be born again”. Really? --- your typical person responds. Why would I want that? There are Christians, and some are very nice, and then there are those “born again” types. You know the ones. The ones with the rigid authoritarian moralistic structure, making them incredibly uptight, incredibly judgmental. Aren’t those the ones who suppress science, the primary deniers of climate change? Aren’t those the fanatical over-emotional types? I prefer to be a little more temperate in my convictions, thank you very much.

In a recent poll in the States, 45% of Americans called themselves born again Christians, and yet 70 – 80% of Americans said they would not want to live next door to a born-again Christian. Meaning that a good portion of born again Christians wouldn’t even want to live next door to one another! And yet, Jesus says: “you must be born again”!

Now the term traces its lineage back to a very famous conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus recorded in our text today from John, chapter 3. I’ll invite you turn there in your bibles (John 3: 1-15) and, as we’ll see, to be born again does not result in the negative cultural caricature, but is actually one of the most hope-filled transformative realities of the Christian message. This conversation and Nicodemus’ life will show us the necessity, the means, and the results of being born again.

So first, the necessity – you must be born again.

The first verse introduces us to Nicodemus. The text gives us an incredible amount of detail about him, telling us that who he is is vital to our understanding. He is a Pharisee. Now we are used to having a negative view of this group. They are to us the antagonists of the story. But in their society they were the most respected group of people. If you were a man, you wanted to be a Pharisee. If you were a parent, you wanted your daughter to marry a Pharisee. You wanted a Pharisee to be in your social circle. Not only was Nicodemus a Pharisee, he was a ruler, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court, a prestigious group of 70. In vs. 10, we discover not only that he is a religious teacher, he is THE teacher. He is the primary religious authority within the Jewish faith. Later in John, we see evidence of his incredible wealth. Some of the commentators point out that his name gives indication that he is from a family of national heroes, a family of great reputation. We would be hard pressed then to find a person in all of Israel with greater power, reputation, wealth, influence, religious understanding; than Nicodemus.

He come to Jesus at night, some say not a significant fact, that’s simply the time scholars debate, others say his nighttime arrival is to cloak his meeting with Jesus in darkness --- he’s afraid of what others might think. But, the most likely explanation, given John’s use of the terms day/night/light/darkness, is that he is telling us that Nicodemus for all his wealth, power, influence, authority, learning; is in the dark, which is exactly how the conversation opens

Now what is this a conversation about? Well this is a conversation that we are deeply concerned about. We pray into it regularly in the Lord's Prayer. We pray: "thy kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven". Nicodemus was yearning, as we are yearning, for a future time when our world would reflect everything that God intended. A world of: beauty, peace, justice, equality. A future where our lives would reflect everything that God intended for our humanity, reflecting his love, generosity, kindness, and holiness; where our will and Gods will are perfectly aligned.

In vs. 2, Nicodemus begins a conversation on this topic: "We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him". In other words, we see you rightly teaching about the kingdom, in you we have seen the power of God, in you we have seen God's active reign breaking in, in you we have seen the signs of God's coming kingdom. And Jesus' issues a stark reply: "actually Nicodemus, you don't see a thing". Vs. 3, truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again they cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus, you say you can see, but actually you don't see a thing. Now, how would this land with Nicodemus?

You see the prevailing theological view of the day was that access to the kingdom of God was a given for a child of Abraham. As a Jew that future could be counted upon as long as you didn't do something to disqualify yourself. Would there have been anyone in the entire city of Jerusalem, the entire nation of Israel even, that one could say, well if there is anyone qualified for the kingdom of God, it is Nicodemus - -- right --- he is a member of a group who above every other group has committed themselves to obedience to God's law. He has given his life to serve his people on the Sanhedrin. He is THE religious teacher of Israel. He is from a family of national heroes. If there is anyone qualified for the kingdom of God, it is Nicodemus. And Jesus says to this man: "...actually, you don't see a thing. The only way you can see the kingdom is if you are born again. Your goodness won't get you there. Your service of your people won't get you there. Your service of God won't get you there. Your family history won't get you there. Your right theology won't get you there. The only way you will see the kingdom is if you are born again."

What is Jesus saying? He is saying that none of us, exactly how we are, will inherit the kingdom. Our problem is not that we are basically ok and just need a shot of spirituality, or a slight tweaking of our theological or political commitment; a little dose of self-discipline. Our problem is our very nature.

It was John Calvin who said, born again means not the amendment of a part, but the renewal of the whole.

One preacher put it this way, if you placed in front of a lion a piece of meat and a bowl of oatmeal, what is the lion going to eat? If you put that choice in front of the lion 1000 times, what would be result every time? She would eat the meat right. Why? She's carnivorous --- it's her very nature.

The bible's / Jesus' picture of humanity is that if you place in front of us a choice to serve self, or to serve God; if you put in front of us 1000 choices to serve self or to serve God; we would always choose to serve self. Why? It's in our very nature. That's not to say you won't be good, or loving, or religious, or won't come to God; but that by our very nature we will do those things because we believe they are in our best interest.

We cannot see the kingdom of God. We will not see our world / our lives perfectly aligned with his will unless we are born again. We don't need amendment of a part. We need the renewal of the whole. In vs. 6 Jesus affirms this: that which is born of flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. In other words, pigs beget pigs, and elephants beget elephants, and chickens beget chickens; like produces like, Sinner then produces sinner, you can't get away from that.

Let's say you have an apple tree in your backyard and you have gotten a little sick of apples year after year. You've run out of good recipes and you think to yourself it would be great instead to have something rather savory. I think I would like olives this year from that tree. And you know a little about gardening and you have heard that fertilizer impacts the fruit produced from trees, so you use copious amounts of fertilizer. Will you get olives? Of course not, you'll just get bigger apples. Next season rolls around, you do a little bit of research and you learn that pruning impacts the fruit that a tree produces. And so you prune your apple tree. Will you get olives? Of course not, you will simply get more apples. The only way to get different fruit from that tree is to tear it out, roots and all, and plant an entirely new tree that will produce an entirely new fruit.

We cannot see the kingdom of God. We will not see our world /our lives perfectly aligned with his will unless we are born again. We don't need amendment of a part. We need the renewal of the whole. Now, does that crush you, or give you hope?

You see this message has come to the Nicodemus' of the world and is often rejected because their wealth, their power, their status, their goodness tells them they are ok, tells them they are acceptable. As one put it, all we need here is nothing, but most of us don't have nothing.

But this message has come to those who are downtrodden, who lack wealth and position and power and goodness. People to whom the world says, you are not ok, and it has been received as a message of incredible hope, because it says nothing in my life can ever disqualify me, nothing that I lack can ever bar me, you must be born again.

So, how are we born again? How do we receive that entirely new nature? What is the means of new birth?

Nicodemus is as confused as we would be, right? Vs. 4 – how can this happen? How can a person get back into their mother's womb and be born a second time? Now Jesus responds to his confusion the way any of us would. He restates the idea differently in a way he anticipates can be better understood Vs. 5, truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. What does it mean to be born again? Nicodemus, it means to be born of water and the Spirit. Now that clears it right up doesn't it?

The commentators are just as confused as Nicodemus. Some say, well, this refers to a natural birth, through water, through amniotic fluid, followed by spiritual rebirth --- conversion. Others say Jesus is telling us we need two baptisms, the water baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and the Spirit baptism where we receive the gifts of the Spirit. But this I think simply reads later Christian debate back into the text because in response to Nicodemus' continued confusion, vs. 10, Jesus says how can you be THE

teacher of Israel and not get this? In other words, as someone immersed in the scriptures, having memorized them word for word, you should know something of what I am talking about.

You see, in Ezekiel 36, both water and Spirit are clearly referenced as the prophet looks forward to a time when God would sprinkle water upon his people, cleansing them from their sins and give them the Spirit to melt their hearts, empowering them to live into true humanity – a humanity that's will is perfectly aligned with God's.

And where do we see this cleansing and empowering work of God? In Jesus, the cleansing from sin through his death and resurrection, the sending of his Spirit upon, for that is where Jesus' points us in the final verse – and 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, may enter the kingdom, may have the future of God enter their lives even now. Now this is one of the oldest and most obscure references that Jesus ever makes. He is pointing us back to an incident from Numbers 21. Israel has been rescued from slavery in Egypt. They are wandering the desert. They are complaining bitterly against God and against Moses. Why did you bring us out here to die? We have no bread. We have no water. And, we have to eat this miserable food you keep sending us.

God responds in discipline, in judgement, he sends snakes into the camp, they bite the people, it has the desired effect. They come to Moses and say: we have sinned against God and against you. Pray to God and ask him to remove the snakes. And Moses prays and God tells him: make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole, and everyone who has been bit, if they look at that snake they will be healed. And that's the entire story.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake, so I will be lifted up says Jesus. And every other time that phrase lifted up is used in the gospel of John, it refers to Jesus being lifted up on the cross.

What is Jesus saying by this obscure and odd reference? I think he is saying see the connection between Moses lifting up the snake and me being lifted up on the cross and you will be cleansed of sin and empowered by my Spirit. See the connection and you will be born again. See the connection and you will receive an entirely new nature. What could possibly be the connection here?

Perhaps it is this. What is the problem the Israelites are facing? It's the snakes, right? What's the solution God offers? Also a snake. What does God send as a solution to our problem? The son of God in human form. What then is our problem? We look at the cross and see it --- it is our very humanity.

What was God's judgement upon the sin of the Israelites? The snakes. What was the nature of their salvation, the means of their healing, and the power for new life? Also a snake. The means of their judgement is also the means of their salvation. I think that is the connection we are meant to see.

See me; see the son of Man lifted up on the cross. See the reality that your humanity is your primary problem. See your humanity being judged in me, dying in me, trust in me, believe in me, and you will be born again, you will be cleansed from sin, and I will give you my Spirit empowering you to live into an entirely new humanity.

Now how can that possibly lead to an entirely new nature? I don't know. It's a mystery. I can't explain it, and before we think this is a cop out, a sidestepping of a difficult question, it is actually the answer Jesus gives. Vs. 8, the wind blows where it wishes and you hear its sound but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going, so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Perhaps Jesus and Nicodemus are on the roof of the house. They are feeling the wind on their cheeks. They are seeing the palm branches moving. They are hearing the rustling of the leaves. How does this new birth come about? Says Jesus, it's like the wind. It's a mystery. Ancient people wouldn't experience the wind and say: oh, this is evidence of a high over the Arabian Desert or a low over the Mediterranean. The wind is a mystery. But you can see, you can feel, you can hear its results. The new birth is a mystery, but you can see, you can hear, you can feel its results.

Did Nicodemus receive this new birth? This uprooting of his old nature and the planting of a new? We certainly don't have any explicit reference. But we certainly can make an inference. Right after Jesus' death, in John 19, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus approach the Roman governor asking for permission to remove Jesus' body for burial. To align himself publicly with Jesus would be to risk facing the same fate. Would be to risk losing everything he had. It took incredible courage to make such a request.

He and Joseph take the body down. They wipe the blood and grime away. They wrap the body with cloth and place it in the tomb. No man in this culture would do that. This was a job for slaves and women. The text tells us that he provides 75 lbs. of myrrh and aloe. Some have estimated that to be the modern equivalent of 150 – 200k dollars' worth of precious spices. Here is a man who will stand with Jesus in the face of incredible cost. Here is a man who has been enabled to lay down any male pride, and class pride, any cultural pride, to step into doing something that no man in his culture would ever do. Here is a man whose wealth has no grip upon his heart, as he lavishly spends it to honor Jesus. Like the new birth is a mystery, but you can see, you can hear, you can feel its results.

Commentator William Barclay tells the story of a workman who had been an alcoholic before receiving new birth. His colleagues constantly mocked him. Surely, they said, you don't believe in miracles. Surely you don't believe Jesus turned water into wine. I don't know the man said, whether he turned water into wine when he was in Palestine, but I do know that in my own house and home, he has turned beer into furniture. Like the wind, the new birth is a mystery, but you can see, you can hear, you can feel its results.

Augustine, before he was converted, was basically a sex addict. After new birth, he was visiting a town where he had had a long-term sexual relationship with a woman. She came running up and he was warm and kind and courteous but was different. He said goodbye and went his way. And she was entirely confused. Why was he treating me that way, so differently, ah, maybe he doesn't recognize me? So, as he walked away. She called out after him --- Augustine, it is I! He turned around and said, I know, but it is not I. Like the wind, the new birth is a mystery, but you can see, you can hear, you can feel its results. Priorities change. Loves change. Joys change. Goals change. Convictions change. Appetites change. Vocabulary changes.

Have you looked to Jesus and received the gift of new birth? Have you received that new birth, but the results seem to have dried up? Seem to be a thing of the past? Have you received that new birth and long to see, to feel, to hear more of its fruit?

There are no appeals I can make to inspire you. No application I can give to bring it forth. No nugget of biblical truth I can impart to lock it in. I can only point you where Jesus pointed Nicodemus. See me lifted up, like Moses lifted up the serpent. See that your primary problem is your humanity. See that you need an entirely new nature, not the amendment of a part, but the renewal of the whole. See your humanity being judged in me, dying in me, and believing in me, trusting in me, be cleansed of your sin, empowered by my spirit. How does that lead to new life? Like the wind, it's a mystery. But you will most definitely see, and hear, and feel the results.

Let's pray.