

“A Fresh Start”

John 3:1-21

Nicodemus knew a lot. He was a learned theologian, a teacher, and a leader among the teachers of Israel. He knew a lot, but there was something about Jesus that made him want to know more. So he slipped away at night to speak to this teacher who kept doing miraculous signs. Why at night? Perhaps he had a reputation to uphold, perhaps he didn't want to be seen by his friends, perhaps he wanted a few moments without the crowds. So under the cover of darkness, and as the embers of the fire glowed, he gingerly approached the subject: *“Teacher, we know that you are a teacher come from God – no one can do the signs you do apart from the presence of God.”* What Nicodemus after, what did he want? Nicodemus wanted God – his whole life was built on knowing and following God; he wanted God.

He wanted the presence of God. In the Bible, that's called life in the kingdom of God. Life in the kingdom of God isn't just eternity, out there somewhere one day. The kingdom of God is here, it is within you and among us; wherever people choose God's will, wherever people live in God's way, there is God's kingdom. And Nicodemus wanted that. He wanted a life full of grace and goodness and love and joy and peace. The Bible also calls that eternal life. Eternal life is not just out there one day somewhere; it's here and now, the life of God within you and within us. Nicodemus wanted that. Wouldn't you. And Jesus understood that when Nicodemus asked this careful question about signs, he was really seeking God.

But Jesus' answer brought Nicodemus up short. Jesus said, *“I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom.”* Fred Buechner puts it, unless you can be born again, you might as well give up; life with God isn't possible. Nicodemus didn't have any idea what Jesus was talking about – he took it literally. *“How,”* he asked, *“is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible for a person to enter his mother's womb a second time, isn't it?”* Isn't it? Isn't it impossible for an adult to be born? I have a four month old at home, and she has grown so fast in these few months, she is so much bigger than when she was born; not even she could enter her mother's womb a second time.

Nicodemus had no idea what Jesus meant when he said, “born again.” There is a lot of confusion about what these words mean for us too. Presbyterians, we don't even like to use that phrase – we're afraid of being pegged as “holy rollers,” as radicals, as religious nuts. I grew up with the phrase born again, and here's what it meant to the folks I grew up with. It meant that you had confessed Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, period. If someone asked you, when were you born again, they meant, when did you confess faith in Jesus Christ? And that little term became a litmus test for who was really a Christian and who was not, who was in and who was out. I don't think we understood what Jesus meant by “born again,” any more than Nicodemus did. It doesn't mean that go back into your mother's womb; but neither does it mean that you simply utter a confession of faith.

Born again, or born anew, means that God's Spirit is living within you, creating something new within you, making more than you are. Being born anew means that God is working on you, doing what you cannot do for yourself. God is healing you, leading you into love and grace and goodness. God is growing you into the image of Christ himself, transforming you step by step. It is like being born, but being born from above. Because there is a person that God is creating, calling out, bringing into being – and it is you, you in your best sense, you as God created you and destines you to be. This is the work of God's Spirit.

But Nicodemus didn't understand it. Nicodemus was thinking "flat." He was thinking on "this level," about what he could see, and do, and know, and confirm, and understand, and control. He saw the signs and he wanted to know what they meant, he wanted to know if Jesus was the one that he seemed to be, he wanted to know if the kingdom of God was about to break in and rescue people from Rome, he wanted to know if his expectations were about to come true. He wanted to know the plan. He wanted to get the facts. He wanted to make plans, and decide what to do. Nicodemus was thinking flat, he was thinking about the things he could figure out and control.

We think "flat," too. In fact, it's our usual way of thinking. Your marriage is having difficulty, and you want to know, "what's going on and what should we do." If I sit down and sort out all the facts, and consult the best books, and get some good strategies, then we can fix this – it's in our control. You lost your job, or you're unhappy with the one you have, and you think, "I just need to figure this out. Get all the facts on paper, do sort out my resume, look at all the options, think through all the angles, and make a plan. I figure this out." That's thinking flat, thinking about what I can figure out, what I can control, what I can manage and fix. What's my plan, what's my strategy? Nicodemus thought life with God was this way; he thought becoming God's child was that way too; he thought following God was that way too! Like he could map it out, follow the plan, and achieve success. And so do we! Just do what Jesus would do; just follow the example, obey the rules, do the right thing, and it will all fall into place.

But not quite. You must be born again, born anew, born from above. You can't do it on your own. It must be act of God's grace, it must be God's Spirit working within you. Jesus goes on to say, "*The wind blows where it chooses, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" It's like the wind – you can't control it, you can only wait for it. The Spirit of God blowing in your life is not something in your power, no more than the wind that blows through the trees. It happens, in its own way and its own time. Have you ever been sailing? You cannot control the wind – when it blows you catch it and go with it; and when it does not blow, you simply must wait. The grace and goodness of God that fills our lives is on God's time, not ours. Sometimes you face a challenge or a moment in life, and you know that it's a turning point. In a marriage, or career, with your children, or your own dreams for the future; perhaps with your health, battling an addiction or other disease. No amount of fact checking, or strategy and planning can solve the riddle. It's simply not in your control.

You need *inspiration* – which is another way of saying, you need the Spirit of God to blow through. *We simply must wait on the wind*. The hardest part of this is giving up control. None of us like to feel powerless, helpless to solve our problems; none of us likes to admit that we can't fix it or figure it out. But that's where it starts. That's where being born again starts. The journey of becoming a child of God, the adventure of being born from above, begins by admitting that we can't control it. There's an old joke about Maine, that if you ask a Mainer for directions, he's likely to say, "Well, you can't get there from here." It's a joke in Maine – it's the spiritual truth for us. You can't get there from here. When it comes to life in the kingdom God, becoming the person that God is creating you to be, you can't get there from here. It's only by God's grace.

The *good news* is that God has already decided to make it so. As John says, "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son ...*". God has already decided that the wind will blow, that the Spirit will move, that you will be born from above, that you will become the one he is creating you to be. It's just a matter time, and letting go, and waiting for the wind.

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