

Born from Above

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 January 2016

Preacher: Rev. Daniel Beilman

[0 : 00] Did you see the New York Times article published on December 23rd, which stated that the average American adult lives just 18 miles from his or her mother?

I read it. If you read it, it might have confirmed a couple of thoughts you've had about Church of the Advent. The first is, we are as strange and peculiar as we thought we were. Most people in this room, I think, live far more than 18 miles from their mother, right?

Just a few of us don't. The second is, if you have experienced loneliness or disconnectedness in the city of Washington, D.C., those feelings are probably normal, and probably a lot of people around you are experiencing or have experienced those feelings.

Last thought, it might confirm, if the Bible really describes the Church as God's family in the world, then right now we should be conforming ourselves to God's vision for what family should look like. And if he makes promises concerning that family, that it's imperative that we claim those promises for ourselves. The last two weeks, we've looked at these promises found in the Old Testament, what it means for God's people to be God's family in the world.

[1 : 25] The first week, which was three weeks ago, we looked at Genesis chapter 12, and in particular God's promise that he would make a family, one that covered the earth, and through this family all the peoples of the earth would be blessed.

In week two, which was two weeks ago, obviously, we looked at Isaiah 56, and we saw that this family that God is creating or will create is open to all.

It consists of the loneliest, the smallest, the weakest, the outsider. It's not for insiders. It's not for the strongest or the most clever.

And today, we will look at how one enters that family. And we enter God's family the same way that most people enter a family.

We're born into it. We're born. And tonight, we're going to look at how this new birth is a matter of life and death. I'm not trying to be dramatic.

[2 : 26] Those are the two points. We're going to look at life. We're going to look at death. First, we're going to look at life. We're going to look at new life that comes in Christ. But first, we need to ask God to help us, to give us wisdom and understanding to receive and to get this passage from John chapter 3.

Let's pray. Let's pray. God, we would want a new life. God, not just for ourselves as individuals, but for our church.

And not just for our church, but for the people around us. For our families, our friends, our housemates, our neighbors. So would you help us to understand what this new life is?

To receive it? To experience it? To live it? God, thank you for giving it. God, thank you for giving us your word that we might know you and understand you better.

And that we might be members of your family. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So when Tommy read the passage from John, you would have heard Jesus say three times, truly, truly.

[3 : 49] Some translations will say, verily I say unto you. In the original Greek, Jesus says, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. You must be born again.

Amen. Amen. You must be born of water and the Spirit. With power and authority, Jesus is saying, you must get this.

You must receive this. You must take your whole life on this. You must have new life on God's terms. So what in this conversation with Nicodemus causes Jesus to say this so emphatically?

It reminds me of a friend of mine who raises Akita dogs. These are really big, muscular, thick dogs. And one time he snapped.

The dog snapped at his wife. And asked, what did you do? Well, my friend said, well, I took the dog by the jowls. I pinned it to the ground and looked into his eyes until he stared away.

[4 : 54] I thought, how frightening. For the dog. If you knew my friend. Yeah. Yeah. And when I read Jesus saying, truly, truly, I feel like he is looking into my eyes with authority and power as my master saying, you have to get this.

You have to get this. The passage tells us that Nicodemus was a man of the Pharisees and a ruler of the Jews. He's brilliant.

He's powerful. And he's devout. Now, the Judaism that Nicodemus and Jesus both knew had a good deal to do with being born into the right family.

What mattered in Nicodemus' day was being a child of Abraham. And if you're born of this family, you need to keep the house rules, which are being circumcised, keeping the Sabbath, keeping and following the Jewish law and tradition, both written and oral.

And this qualifies you to enter and receive the kingdom of God. Now, for Nicodemus, to see the kingdom of God was to participate in the kingdom at the end of the age, to experience eternal resurrection life.

[6 : 15] Here, Jesus is saying, God is starting a new family in which this ordinary birth is not enough. You need to be born all over again, born from above.

And that resurrection life begins here and now. Now, as an aside, ever since the 60s and 70s, the phrase born again has acquired all kinds of different and often negative secondary meanings and connotations.

When Jesus says it in Greek, it can be understood as both born again and born from above. It means, the same word means both. And we're going to assume they mean both.

He means both at the same time. And because of that, I'm going to use them interchangeably.

Okay. But anyway, the key to this, being born again, being born from above, is transformation.

Nicodemus had for years taught others the conditions of entrance into the kingdom of God, conditions cast in terms of obedience to God's commands, devotion to God, and happy submission to his will.

[7 : 17] But here, Nicodemus is facing a condition he has never heard expressed, the absolute requirements of birth from above. Now, he doesn't really think that Jesus is saying that one must once again enter the womb of one's mother.

Jesus, excuse me, Nicodemus' response is one of incredulity. He was amazed at the very category. New life, new birth. Well, this new birth takes place through God's initiative.

Okay? It takes place through God's initiative, as John says earlier in chapter 1, in which we hear every year at the Lessons and Carol service. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Here again, we see in scriptures the uniqueness of the Christian religion. It is not man that seeks God, but God that seeks man. It's not man that attempts to ascend to heaven, but God descends to earth.

Jesus, forsaking his own life to rescue us and bring us into relationship with his Father to give us new life. We are born from above, transformed, and being transformed into the image of the Father.

[8 : 47] How does that happen? Jesus says you must be born of water and the Spirit. Now, last week, Tommy ended a sermon by saying that water is thicker than blood.

The sign that we have been brought into the family is water baptism. And if you've never seen a baptism, we'll do them on Easter Sunday.

That's March 27th. Don't miss it. Baptism is a seal of the promises he has made to us. That seal signifies ownership. It's a seal.

It signifies ownership and security and membership into God's family. To be baptized is to become a child in the household of the Father and a brother to Jesus Christ. Because to be baptized is to be inducted into the family of God, the body of Christ.

Now, on the other side of this coin is being born in the Spirit.

[9 : 51] It's new life bubbling up from within. The Holy Spirit indwelling us, causing new life, a new heart. Water and Spirit are closely joined.

Nobody in the early church supposed that Spirit baptism mattered so much that you could do without water baptism. Now, there are many instances in the New Testament where Jesus needs to

correct this.

Those who are baptized with water but don't seem to be baptized with the Spirit. Those who aren't acting in accordance with God's will and commands. The point in this passage is that this double-sided new birth, which brings you into the visible community of God's family, water baptism, and which gives you the new life of the Spirit welling up like a spring of water inside you, which is spirit baptism, was now required for membership in God's kingdom.

Now, hundreds of years before this, Ezekiel prophesied this. In Ezekiel 37, which we heard Brian read for us earlier tonight, we find God saying, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses.

And from all your idols I will cleanse you, and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart, a flesh, and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to obey my rules.

[11:25] Apparently, Nicodemus had not thought of this passage, and other passages this way, that we need individual regeneration. If he was like some other Pharisees, he was too confident of the quality of his own obedience to think that he needed much repentance.

Repentance. What is repentance? It's turning, right? I think we should think of repentance as an act of death, of death to ourselves, and our sinful inclinations as we turn to God and into new life.

Do you know who Peter Thiel is? He's a billionaire. He co-founded PayPal. He's now focusing on anti-aging research. One time he was speaking about these initiatives, and he said, quite simply, I think that the thing that's really incompatible with life is death.

And it's true. Like, life is, to him, and I think to most of us, a self-evident good. And death is the opposite of life. So how profound is what he said?

That's what Jesus came to bring. And as Christians, we know death to be our great enemy. Yet the converse of what he said is equally true, and ironically true, that life requires death.

[12:54] And that's our second point. New life requires death. Over the last month, I've been reading on the Incarnation by Saint Athanasius.

Athanasius concerns... Athanasius... Athanasius... Slow down, Bielman. Athanasius concerns himself with this point, that humanity's great enemy is death.

How would God overcome this enemy on behalf of humankind? So Athanasius writes, But since the Savior is raising the body, which is the resurrection, no longer is death fearsome, but all believers in Christ tread on it as nothing, and would rather choose to die than deny their faith in Christ.

For they really know that when they die, they are not destroyed, but both live and become incorruptible through the resurrection. Human beings, before believing in Christ, view death as fearsome and are terrified at it.

But when they come to faith in him and to his teaching, they so despise death that they eagerly rush to it and become witnesses to the resurrection over it, affected by the Savior.

[14:25] End quote. Now, could we do that? Would we be so confident in the resurrection that we wouldn't fear death?

That if we were being persecuted and faced the prospect of martyrdom, that we would go against the human nature to survive, and that we would do as our brothers and sisters did back then, and that they still do today in the Middle East, and we would so despise death that we would eagerly rush to it and become witnesses to the resurrection?

If we want to attain that level of confidence and courage that our brothers and sisters had in Athanasius' day, or that many of our martyred brothers, I'm thinking of the 21 on the shore of North Libya, if we would have that kind of confidence and courage, then perhaps the key lies in something that Athanasius says just a little bit later.

He refers to men and women despising this present life and practicing dying. What an interesting phrase. Practicing dying.

What would that mean? It means that you would so prefer the love of Christ and your life in Christ that you would do without the things of this world that would compete for that love.

[15:47] You'd die to yourself. You'd die to your desires. You'd die to your sinful tendencies. You'd die to the things that are giving you life apart from God.

You'd die to the things that you would hate to lose if you had to depart this world. And this is our application for today, that living a life, a new life, a born-again life, a life from above, means dying.

In 11 days, the season of Lent begins. This is the time of year, the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, that Christians around the world take a deep, hard look at themselves and at their desires and choose to give up things that would compete with their love for Christ.

They take stock and see, like, wow, social media has assumed too dominant a place in my life. Or I too easily go to a glass of wine or to sweets or to binge-watching on Netflix to attain confidence or life or release.

I do these things instead of going to God. Last year, I gave up buying cups. This is my Lent from last year. I gave up buying cups of coffee from stores, like Starbucks and what have you.

[17:03] I would find myself walking by a store. Like, one day I found myself walking by an LPQ, Le Pong, Quotidian. And the next thing I know, I'm outside that same store with a cup of coffee in my hand.

Like, what? How did that happen? Like, without thinking, I just went in, got a cup of coffee, and walked out. Like, just randomly. Yikes. You know, if we give our money, like, to the things that we love, can we take that as a maxim?

Then I was, I saw how this ritual was giving my love for Christ competition. So I cut that out for Lent. For Lent. I gave up something else. I gave up, I gave up resentment.

And I found that I had been nursing a grudge. And, you know, it was thrilling. It was life-giving to nurse that grudge.

And think about that phrase, nursing a grudge. Imagine nursing. Like, it's not hard for me to imagine that as I get older, I haven't worked out in a few years, and my, my, never mind.

[18:10] Forget it. But, we, we keep a grudge close to our hearts, and, and nurse it. You know, had I opened up the overcoat of my soul, you would have seen me keeping this monster at my breast, right?

Daily, hourly nursing it with resentful thoughts and feelings until it become part of my life, like a tumor. My, my Lenten practice, how I practiced dying, was to pray for this person every day. And each time I prayed, it was like cutting into this tumor. Easter. And it was painful. To pray for this person felt like death to me.

It felt like dying. But at the end of Lent, I feel like I experienced new life. Like, Easter felt like resurrection.

I felt forgiveness for this person. You know, I, I felt great, as one often does when they stop drinking poison, right? It's, so I didn't grow up in the Anglican tradition.

[19:29] And so, Lent is probably as new to me as it is for many of you. And I might have said 10, 20 years ago, as some of you might say, or could say, as an objection to observing Lent.

Like, shouldn't we be doing that all year long? Shouldn't we be dying to ourselves, giving up things that are wrong, like, all year long? And, and yes. Like, the answer is both and, okay?

Of course, we should be dying to ourselves all year long. It's just that we give repentance a seat of honor at the table during Lenten season. Just as we should be celebrating all year long, we push celebration to a seat of honor at the table during Christmas and Advent.

So, over the next 11 days, consider what you can give up. It's not a requirement. But give, consider what you can give up for Lent, and we will be meeting here the morning of February 10th, 7.30, or earlier, 7.30, here in this room and celebrate Ash Wednesday, a day that we remember our mortality, and we commit ourselves together to practicing dying during the season of Lent.

So, it's a both and, right? So, we should be, we can practice this, we can practice dying during Lent, but we should be practicing this all year long. We should be dying to ourselves every day.

[20:58] And that's what it means to have new life in our new family when we are born from above, when we are born into God's family. Being a part of a family completely reshapes one's priorities.

in this family, we die to our preferences and prefer one another instead. And this is why John, in a letter he would write later, which Alex read for us earlier, the book of 1 John, John writes, everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.

By this we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments. So what if we used Lent to ask our brothers and sisters, what are our blind spots?

We can use the season as a checkup, asking those closest to us, what are the things about ourselves that we don't realize that are causing friction in the family or are undermining our

integrity?

Things that we're making idols out of, things that aren't easily visible to us, but are pretty obvious to others. Dying to ourselves is the way we will get along and love each other deeply.

[22 : 19] It will be how our church becomes a place of welcome and healing for the world. This act of dying to ourselves, we must admit, is a supernatural feat.

So where do we get the power to do this? Where do we find the power to die to ourselves? Look to your baptism. When we're saved by water and spirit, we are baptized into the life of Christ.

We are united to him in his death and his resurrection. Not only does life require death, as I said earlier, but life requires a death. It requires one death.

Jesus Christ came to earth and died that we might have life. We read in the book of Numbers that during their wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites grumbled against Moses and they were punished by poisonous snakes invading the camp, killing many of them.

God gave Moses the remedy. He was to make a serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole and hold it up for people to look at. Jesus cites this. Oh, anyone who looked at the serpent on the pole would be saved and cured and healed?

[23 : 32] And Jesus cites this Old Testament narrative and he appropriates it. Jesus says in verses 14 and 15 of our passage tonight, 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.

That's the frankest answer to Nicodemus' question. How can this happen? How can one be born again? The kingdom of God is seen or entered, new birth is experienced, and eternal life begins through the saving cross work of Christ, his death on the cross, that work received by us in faith. Jesus' response ultimately shows that Nicodemus' problem wasn't a problem of understanding, it was a problem of belief. It wasn't about rules and concepts, it's about a person who Jesus really is and what he really has done for humanity.

Humankind as a whole has been smitten with a deadly disease. The only cure is to look at the Son of Man, Jesus, dying on the cross and find life through believing in him. Do you have new life?

That's the question. That's really the only question to ask after reading this passage, right? Do you have new life? Have you been born again?

[24 : 51] Have you been born from above? If you haven't and you want new life, the answer is to look to Jesus.

Look to the person of Jesus. Talk to me or Tommy or Josh or any of our prayer ministers who congregate here during communion and we can show you the way how to put your life in submission to Christ, how to be trusting in the work of Christ for forgiveness of sins, for eternal life, and for access to an intimate relationship with God the Father.

Now, have you been born again and you know you're in the family, but it doesn't feel like you're experiencing this new life? You don't feel, experience the joy that comes from having your sins forgiven and your relationship with the Father restored.

And the answer is the same. Look to Jesus. Look to Jesus. Precisely because evil lurks deep within each of us for healing to take place, we must ourselves be involved in the process.

This doesn't mean that we just try harder to be better, to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. All we can do, just as it was all the Israelites could do in the desert, is to look and to trust.

[26 : 19] Look at Jesus. See in him the full display of God's saving love and to trust in him. When we're born from above, we're born into a family and Jesus becomes our big brother.

So let me leave you with a story about two brothers. It's a story that singer-songwriter Sandra McCracken tells about two young boys in Missouri who spent their summer playing by some sandbag levees.

These levees had held back some of the extreme flooding that had happened over the past decade on the Mississippi River. But the levees broke and the boys found themselves in quicksand.

When rescue workers finally found them and came to them, they found only the young boy. So the rescuers asked, where's your older brother? And he said, he's here.

I'm standing on his shoulders. The older brother had sacrificed his life to save his younger brother.

Just as this young boy needed saving, we too were once sinking in the sand of our sin and it took our older brother Jesus to sacrifice himself so we could be saved.

[27 : 34] And like the little boy, we are still in the sand of sin but saved from the death it would cause. We stand on Jesus' shoulders and one day the rescue worker Jesus will come back and pull

us out completely.

That's what it means to be saved and to have eternal life. So believe in him, look to him, trust in him, maybe for the first time, maybe for the thousandth time.

Look to Jesus in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. let's pray. Father, we give you glory for your plan to rescue humankind stuck in the quicksand of sin and death for sending your Son Jesus to die for us and to rise again that we might experience new life that death and sin would be conquered and we could experience life forever with you forever but even in the here and now new, abundant life in the midst of our suffering in the midst of our pain.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Jesus, thank you for dying that we might live. It's in your name we pray, Jesus, our Savior, our big brother.

[29 : 09] Amen.