

Born From Above

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Date: 16 January 2022

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning, I'm Denise Yon, and I'm part of the San Francisco Community Group.

Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verses 1 to 21, as printed in the liturgy. Now, there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.

Jesus replied, Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. How can someone be born when they are old? Nicodemus asked.

[1 : 1 2] Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered, Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. How can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, Jesus said, and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

[2 : 3 3] For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, because whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ. Good morning, Christ Church.

Did anyone else wake up yesterday morning to a tsunami warning? Or was that just me? That's the first time. I've lived here 16 years. First time I've ever received one of those. And what I found so disconcerting was that it wasn't like an amber alert.

[3 : 54] You know, it's this extremely loud, jarring sound that tells you something terrible is happening right now. It was more like this quiet, subtle text that came on my phone that was like, hey, you're about to die in a tsunami.

And I was like, man, can we put an alarm on that? What if I hadn't woken up, you know? And did anybody else have a panic when you saw that?

Well, what I love are our tsunami evacuation route signs. Have you seen those? They're really interesting. They tell people which way to run.

They're these blue signs, and they have a giant scary wave and a little arrow pointing inland. And that's our tax dollars at work helping us out.

Now, if you see a big, wet, mean, scary wall of water coming this way, and you don't know that you should turn around and start running that way, that sign's probably not going to help you very much.

[4 : 56] You're like, you need more help than that. Is this like a stand-in-the-doorway situation? Stop, drop, and roll? What do I do right now? Okay, we are in the Gospel of John.

And we're looking at this Gospel from Christmas to Easter. And it's organized around a series of 11 conversations with Jesus. And today we're looking at the first and most important of these face-to-face encounters.

And it's Nicodemus, this guy Nicodemus, who's engaging in this back-and-forth Q&A; session with Jesus. And through this Gospel, we too are invited to enter into regular, ongoing encounters and conversations with Jesus.

And notice who's part of this late-night dialogue. It's a conversation between two great teachers. The older teacher, we're told in verse 10, is the teacher of Israel.

There's a definite article there in the Greek. He's the teacher of Israel. This is Professor Nicodemus, Dr. Nicodemus. He's an expert on the Bible, theology, and divinity.

[6 : 03] And the younger teacher has no formal theological training, has no institutional right to be called a rabbi, but he is making his mark. And this famous teacher has taken notice, caught his attention, and he's come seeking Jesus as an honest inquirer, as a curious explorer.

Probably Nicodemus has heard Jesus teaching the crowds in public. He probably knows about Jesus' special training for his inner circle of disciples. And so he comes for this private, personal, one-on-one talk with Jesus.

And he says in verse 2, Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you were doing if God were not with him. It's clear through the supernatural signs of power, changing water to wine, healing people, feeding people, forgiving people, it's clear that you are from God and that God is with you.

The teacher of Israel sees in Jesus a unique teacher, and he says, I want to learn from you. I want to learn from you. He has an open and independent mind. He's not, you know, a conformist to the crowd and the opinions of the crowd.

Nicodemus is determined to get his questions answered from the source. And I pray that Christchurch would be a place for open-minded seekers of the truth, perhaps friends that God has placed in your life, that we would bring open-hearted people who are honest inquirers and curious explorers.

[7 : 40] And like Nicodemus, they could come here and seek out not a caricatured version of Jesus, which we get often in public opinion, not a piecemeal co-opted version of Jesus, which we get in the news and various books and documentaries, but to seek out and to encounter the real, original, historical Jesus of the Gospels.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, he says, ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you'll find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. And elsewhere in the New Testament, it says that God rewards people who diligently seek him.

And so I hope this is a place for all of us to come and to seek out conversations with Jesus. Now, what's the substance of this conversation between Jesus and the teacher of Israel?

It's simply this, that God's new life comes into you by the Spirit, through the Son, and from the Father. That God's new life comes into you by the Spirit, through the Son, and from the Father.

And I want to just look for a minute of how God's new life comes into you by the Spirit. Listen to Jesus when he says in verse 3, No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.

[9 : 01] Verse 5, No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Verse 6, The Spirit gives birth to Spirit. And he talks about everyone who is born of the Spirit in verse 8.

Now, that term, born again, makes some of us nervous. Is that just me? Or does that make you nervous too? It makes us nervous because that term has been hijacked and abused by people who have no clue what the term means.

You know, I love the bumper stickers of Berkeley. And maybe you've seen the one around town, Born Okay the First Time. That's a good one. Have you seen the one that says, Instead of being born again, why not just grow up?

I like that one. Or there's another one that says, Born Again and Again and Again and Again. Buddhist. One of you sent me a Christmas letter with a bumper sticker for Christmas.

It says, Adam and Eve standing next to a tree. And it says, God's original plan was to hang out with naked vegetarians. And I like that one. So thank you, Keith and Lindsay, for that. Understandably, we're nervous about this term, Born Again, because people claim it who aren't living the reality.

[10 : 11] And we're not sure we want to associate ourselves with such people. But like Nicodemus, let's keep an open mind about Jesus' teaching for a minute. Because eight times in this conversation, he talks about being born and being birthed.

And Jesus is distinguishing between two different kinds of births, two different kinds of life. There's the life of the flesh, and there's the life of the spirit. The Greek word bios, That's a term that describes your biological, physical life that's given to you from below when you're conceived by human parents and born from your mother's womb.

Flesh gives birth to flesh. And that's a common event here at Christ Church. We're blessed with lots of babies. Each new baby is the cutest baby ever here at Christ Church.

But Jesus says we must move from being born of the flesh to being born of the spirit. From biological life to zoe life. And that Greek word zoe is about the life of God that's given to us from above by the Holy Spirit, this new God-centered, God-energized, God-directed life.

And we hear about that. Oh, thank you, God. Did that just turn off? Thank you, Lord. There it is. Amazing. Okay.

[11 : 33] Well, we have to focus. John 3, 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but should have eternal life.

That's the most quoted but least understood verse in the Bible. Zoene aeonion is this Greek term that's talking about the uncreated, energies of God's life, the divine life, the life that's full and abundant, the life that's deep and lasting, the life that's real and genuine, the life of God that is without beginning and without end, that is unceasing.

Jesus says that life can come into you. Naturally, from birth, you only have earthly, bios life.

And Jesus says supernaturally, from above, this heavenly, zoe life of God can come into you. But he says in verse 3, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.

And in verse 5, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Jesus says before you're born again, you're blind. You don't see the kingdom of God.

[12 : 47] Before you're born again, you're an excluded outsider who has not entered into the kingdom of God. And you're like, ouch, Jesus, why are you being so offensive, so off-putting in your language?

What does Nicodemus understand about the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God, all Jewish people know, this is the future resurrection at the end of history where God is going to powerfully heal and recreate and give life to the world.

And where the people that want God are going to welcome him and surrender to his sovereignty and his rule and joyfully embrace his gracious and liberating reign.

And Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, if you want to see and enter into that future reality, even now, you can, Nicodemus. But I have to tell you the truth, you're not ready.

It hasn't happened yet. Something radical needs to change inside of you. Now, most of us are probably thinking, yeah, we all need to change, right?

[13 : 47] None of us are perfect. We could all use an extra infusion of divine help to, you know, sort of be topped off, tuned up, turn over a new leaf, adjust this, tweak that, stop this, start that.

But Jesus would say to us, no, I'm not talking about a reformed, improved, retrofitted, upgraded self where you're born again from below by human effort.

What I'm talking about is a transformed self where you have the life of God implanted in you from above by the Holy Spirit. Now, it's not surprising to us that a woman like the woman we meet in John 4, the Samaritan woman, that she or anyone like her would need to be born from above because her life is so broken.

It's such a complete mess. But what's shocking is that Nicodemus needs to be born from above because have you seen his CV? His resume is kind of like some of your resumes.

Nicodemus is born Jewish. He's born into the family of Abraham. He's a member of the elect covenant people of God. He belongs to the serious Pharisee party, the most earnest Bible-believing branch of the Jewish faith in Jesus' time, committed to righteous living with God and with their neighbors.

[15 : 10] He's the teacher of Israel, a great minister of the word of God, learned, cultured. He's a leader of the Sanhedrin, of the ruling council.

He's a man of great responsibility and respect. He even has a high view and a deep appreciation for Jesus, his divine origin and divine power. Is there anyone more qualified to be a good human being or to enjoy a good relationship with God than Nicodemus?

Does he really need to be born a second time? He has intellectual power, religious fidelity, moral rectitude. He's civically minded.

He's a pillar of his community. He's a highly successful person. It's hard to imagine a finer, more noble, more admirable person. And frankly, any pastor would be doing cartwheels to have Nicodemus become a member of their church.

And what does Jesus say? He says, none of this counts. You have to start all over. Even you, Nicodemus, even you need to be reborn from above to be part of the kingdom of God.

[16 : 22] Whether you're Dr. Nicodemus in John 4, or you're the Samaritan woman of John 4, John 3, whether you're accomplished on the one hand or a failure on the other, whether you're put together or you're deeply broken and jacked up, Jesus says no one can see, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they're born from above.

And you might be thinking, okay, but even Presbyterians need to be born from above? And Jesus says, you must. Without it, you have no knowledge of the eternal, no life of God in you, no hope for heaven.

And maybe you say, okay, well, how does it happen? Jesus tells us in verse eight, he says, the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.

It's difficult to locate the source of the wind or to control its movement. But the power of the wind creates results that everyone can see, right? Clouds scurrying across the sky, ships sailing across the water, turbines creating energy, trees that are bent and even broken in a storm.

And Jesus here is making a pun because the word for wind and spirit is the same word for breath, wind, spirit. It's all the same. Perhaps there's a wind blowing outside the window as Jesus is speaking, the spring breeze.

[17 : 55] And what he's saying is that God, when God puts this invisible, mysterious, but very real power, the wind, the breath, the spirit of God in you, it powerfully brings about a new life, a new DNA, a new heart and mind and will, a new identity and purpose and priorities, new motivations, new ambitions, new awareness of spiritual reality.

And you see, after the new birth, I have the same body, I have the same face, I have the same passport, the same temperament. But if you're an introvert before the new birth, you're gonna be an introvert after the new birth.

It's just that you are gonna find it much easier to live with yourself, right? And if you're an extrovert before the new birth, you're gonna be an extrovert after, you're just gonna be much easier to live with, right?

For the rest of us. The new birth turned the first Christians into history-changing, world-changing figures. Why? Why? Not because they were made of more promising materials than you and me, but because that invisible, mysterious, yet very real power of the Holy Spirit came and it put the new life of God in them.

And nothing's been the same since. So God's new life comes into you by the Spirit. You guys with me so far? Okay, God's new life comes into you by the Spirit, but also through the Son, we're told.

[19 : 35] Through the Son. Let me get a show of hands. How many of you decided to be born? How many of you birthed yourselves? We know that that's not something that you do.

It happens by the prior initiative and decision of your parents. And when you're born, who does all the work? Ask all the mamas in here. They did everything.

The labor pains, the blood, the sweat, the tears. No one is born without a mom who risks her life to give you life. And Jesus drawing on that, he says, when the life of God is birthed in you, you are passive.

And God does all the action on your behalf. And this is what he's getting at in verse 13 when he says, no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. Okay, Jesus is Jewish. He's steeped in Israel's Bible.

[20 : 35] He knows it like the back of his hand. And so he drops these two Bible clues that any Jewish kid ought to know, much less the serious teacher and leader of Israel, Nicodemus.

And so he wants to show Nicodemus that God does all the action to bring about the new birth. And the first clue he gives in verse 13 when he talks about the heavenly Son of Man, he's talking about his own identity and person.

Jesus is given many titles in this gospel so far and many more to come. But you know his favorite self-designated title? The Son of Man. And it comes from the prophet Daniel chapter seven where it says, That's Jesus' favorite self-designation, that he is the Son of Man who has VIP special access to the presence of God, who has God-given authority and glory and kingly power, who's worshiped in every language by every culture, and whose dominion is everlasting and whose kingdom is indestructible.

And he's basically slapping a name tag on himself in front of Nicodemus and saying, Hello, my name is Daniel seven, son of man. He takes Nicodemus' Bible, opens to Daniel seven and says, in the margin, that's me.

Nicodemus, you know me, but I don't think you know me. You respect me, but if you realized who I am, you would fall on the ground before me. You're right to say that I'm a teacher of God's word, but more than that and better than that, I am God's word in the flesh.

[22 : 41] You are right to say that God is with me, but more than that and better than that, God is me. You are right to say that I am from God, but get this, Nicodemus, I descended from heaven and I'm going to ascend to heaven as the bridge, as the ladder between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human realm, because I am the way and the truth and the life and nobody comes to the Father except through me.

That's clue number one. Verse 13, the heavenly son of man, that's Jesus' identity and his person, but clue number two is in verse 14 when he's talking about Moses lifting up the snake.

He's talking about his mission and his work. And again, this is a classic story from the Torah that every Jewish boy or girl would know. Numbers 21, and there the people of God are in the wilderness between Egypt and the promised land and they're doing what the people of God do, rebelling.

And God's judgment comes on them in a plague of these poisonous snakes. And as they get bitten, this toxic venom creates fever and convulsions and thirst and ultimately death.

And really it's an outward physical sign of their inward spiritual reality. God is helping them to see the poisonous pride in their heart, right?

[24 : 05] The venomous vanity in their spirits. That death-dealing toxin of self-centeredness that has a grip on all of our wills. And as they begin to realize this in their misery, they cry out to God for mercy.

And their judge once again becomes their savior. And God in his compassion provides a remedy. He provides a means of healing. He says, okay, make a poison snake substitute out of bronze.

I know this is really strange, but make a poison snake substitute out of bronze, put it on a pole, lift it up. And when every snake-bitten person looks at that substitute, they will be cured.

And they will be saved. And that's what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus. I, when the son of man is lifted up on the tree of the cross, I will become the remedy of God for all the sin and guilt of the world.

I'm gonna take all of your poison and venom and toxins into myself. And I'm gonna become sin on your behalf and take the place of your God forsakenness.

[25 : 15] And why does he do this? Why does he go through all this pain and darkness for us? He tells us in verse 15, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him, in me.

The Zoe, eternal, divine life of God in you. God does all the action so that this can be birthed in you.

And the question for us is, well, what do we need to do? And Jesus says, simply believe. Look at me. Trust me.

Commit yourself to me. Rest the full weight of your life on me. And that heavenly, divine life from above will be birthed in you.

I love these words from this hymn from the 1830s. It says, There is life for a look at the crucified one. There is life at this moment for thee.

[26 : 22] Then look, sinner, look unto him and be saved, unto him who was nailed on the tree. It is not thy tears of repentance nor prayers, but the blood that atones for the soul.

On him then believe and a pardon receive, for his blood can now make you quite whole. Look, look, look and live. There is life for a look at the crucified one.

There is life at this moment for thee. Does that new life come into you? By the Spirit, through the Son?

God's new life, Jesus teaches us, comes into us by the Spirit and through the Son, but also from the Father. It comes to us from the Father. I'll close with this.

All of us have these mental images and these deep-seated assumptions when I just say the word God. We all fill in the blank, right? And oftentimes I like to say, hey, tell me about the God that you don't believe in because I probably don't believe in him either.

[27 : 31] There's so many of those images that are just not true. And we need to come back, I think, to what the gospel says about God. And this is a great statement, right?

Verse 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but should have eternal life.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Again, most famous but least understood passage of the Bible.

It tells us that the Father is the giver and the Son is the gift and the Spirit does the giving precisely because God the Father's nature is to love and to give and to save.

God the Father loves this world that's constantly rebelling against him. He loves his enemies. And he doesn't just love his enemies emotionally and do nothing about it.

[28 : 38] He does the greatest thing he could possibly do, which is to give his highest and his best. He gave his Son in order to get you. Now, you know my three kids, Constance, Scott, and Walter.

They're the joy of my heart, the crown of my life. Do you think I would give any of them to get you? Would I allow them to suffer so that you could be saved?

No way. I mean, I love y'all, but not that much. But thank God that I'm not God. Because God the Father's heart breaks open with love for you.

He is so crazy in love with you that he lays everything he has on the line to get you with reckless love.

It's irresponsible love. But at the end of John's gospel, Nicodemus has clearly become captivated by the Father's love.

[29 : 45] He's clearly reborn from above. He's radically changed from the inside out and holistically transformed by this love that's captivated him and compels him.

And you can listen in John 19. It says that with Pilate's permission, Joseph of Arimathea came and took the body of Jesus away. And he was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night.

Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds. And taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it with the spices and strips of linen, and they laid Jesus in a new garden tomb.

That's a bold move. When the leader of the movement has just been killed and all of his other followers are hiding out, two guys, Nick and Joe, stand up and they say, we're his disciples.

And they risked their lives to identify themselves with Jesus. Now you gotta know that only, the only people who would wash and prepare a dead body for burial were lower class servants.

[31 : 06] Never would you find somebody of privileged upper class leader status dealing with somebody's dead body. But here, Nicodemus' pride is clearly gone.

And he generously gives money. 75 pounds worth of spices is a lot of coin. But he is determined for Jesus to have a burial fit for a king.

And it's just a little picture for us of what it means, what happens when the Father's love gets into us and changes us. Nicodemus is willing to give everything he has, just like God gave everything he had.

He's willing to give his life, his privilege, his resources, so that this crucified, yet soon-to-be resurrected Lord, who reveals the Father's love, would be honored.

Nicodemus, through the Father's love, he becomes this courageous risk-taker, this humble, lowly-minded servant, this generous gift-giver, somebody who's passionate about honoring Jesus' bodily sacrifice on the cross.

[32 : 23] Those are the marks that your heart has been turned inside out and upside down by the love of the Father. And Christchurch, I just want to invite us this morning, like Nicodemus, to receive and to accept the love that the Father has for you today.

I want to invite you to rest and to delight yourself in the belovedness that is yours as we come to the body and blood of Jesus at this meal.

Your job, God has done all the work, your one job is simply believing, simply accepting the Father's acceptance of you, simply opening yourself up to receive the life, the light, and the love that comes by the Spirit through the Son, from the Father.

Amen? In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.