

"You Must Be Born Again"

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[0:00] And our text in the lectionary for Trinity Sunday in our Gospel reading takes us to John chapter 3. I encourage you to open up your pew Bibles or an electronic version of the Bible.

And we're going to spend some time in that text this morning, asking God the Holy Spirit to speak to us. It's an incredibly important passage for us to grasp.

Of course, the whole Bible is important for us to grasp, isn't it? But this particular passage is one of the most significant encounters in the New Testament.

A conversation between Jesus and a man called Nicodemus. And the theme before us is new birth, new life, what it means to be born again.

So let's pray together. Almighty Father, may it please you to illuminate us of the true knowledge and understanding of your Word, that by its preaching and by our living, we may faithfully set it forth and show it accordingly.

[1:12] Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Well, let's think about this plainly for a moment this morning. Here in Syracuse, no doubt as in the rest of our nation, the phrase being born again, what does that mean to you?

Lots of things, I imagine. It's been very diluted and misunderstood across the history and down through the history of the Church, because it's a term with very rich theological depth, and it's been emptied by its cultural overuse and spiritual confusion.

Because in 2025, someone can claim, can't they, to be born again, and yet they can reject the authority of Scripture. They can claim to be born again, and yet they can live in open defiance to Christ's Lordship.

They can deny the existence of hell, and claim to be born again. They can wear that label comfortably. And we have a term evangelical, and the term born again, and it's tossed about, and it's been corrupted.

So we need to look at this Scripture to ascertain what it is that this phrase means in this discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus.

[2:42] Because when we come to John chapter 3, Jesus forces us to look at this deep phrase, what it means to be born again.

There is no salvation without this new birth. You cannot be, you can, you can be confused about many things, and still be saved.

But you cannot be confused about this. So let's open the Bibles. That's a good place for us to start, isn't it? In John chapter 3, and have a look at our text this morning, on this Trinity Sunday.

Of course, John chapter 3 continues what's going on from the end of John chapter 2. And there John tells us that Jesus knows what's in the heart of men.

He knows what is in the heart of women. Your heart and mine. And then he says, the Gospels say, immediately they say, there was a man. So Jesus knows what's in the heart of man.

[3:42] There was a man. Nicodemus is the example. A religious leader. Intrigued, no doubt, by the miracles of Jesus. Nicodemus, drawn to the light, but still in the dark.

And Jesus sees straight through him and goes to the point. Nicodemus, you must be born again. This is not about curiosity.

This is about eternity. So I've got three points I want to share with you this morning. All good Anglican preachers have three points or more. You probably have more, Rector, in your sermons. I've got three this morning. The first is that the new birth is necessary. Would you say the word necessary? It's necessary.

I want you to be thinking about that. Jesus makes this unmistakably clear. Look with me if you would in John 3 in verse 7. You must be born again.

[4:43] Do you see that? Verse 3. Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And glass your eyes down to verse 5. Unless one is born of the water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

This is not a theological add-on here. It's not a higher level of spirituality just for the devoted and the pious. It is essential. That's a word I want you to remember.

For salvation. You cannot even see the kingdom, let alone enter the kingdom, unless you have been born again.

So who is this man, Nicodemus, to whom Jesus is speaking? What do we know about him? Well, we know from the scriptures this morning in our text that he's part of the most devout, morally serious group in Judaism.

He's from the sect of the Pharisees. He's also a ruler of the Jewish people, meaning he sits in the Sanhedrin. A ruler in both religion, very deeply religious, but also in society.

[5:57] And look down at verse 10. We find out something more. Jesus refers to him as a teacher of Israel, recognized scholar. So this isn't some obscure voice that's just coming in from the margins.

This is a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, a religious leader, a civil leader, a teacher of Israel. And in a place like Syracuse, where would we find Nicodemus?

Will it be equivalent of finding him somewhere with very deep denominational ties? Someone with extensive theological training? Someone who has a voice in public society?

A life that is marked out of religious observance? A man who knows the Bible? This is Nicodemus. He knows the scripture. He defends orthodoxy.

He practices spiritual discipline. And amongst the people of God in Syracuse, he would be highly, highly respected. I could reference Ite, could be an example, but I wouldn't want to call you a Pharisee, sir, in the meaning of that word.

[7:12] This is who Nicodemus was. And yet what happens? Jesus looks this incredibly devout, religiously astute, civil leader, religious leader, in the eye.

And he says to him, Nicodemus, you must be born again. And that alone was cause to stop and consider.

If a man like Nicodemus needed to be born again, who among us does not? And so, spiritual pedigree, intellectual rigor, moral achievement exempts no one from this requirement.

Jesus is clear. Without this new birth, you cannot. How could it be clearer? You cannot see the kingdom of God.

And we're also told Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. That's interesting, isn't it? What are we to make about that, I wonder? It may suggest caution. Maybe.

[8:24] Perhaps he feared being seen. Or it may indicate a desire to have some uninterrupted time with Jesus, away from the crowds. Either way, he comes in the dark, and standing before him is whom?

The light of the world, who speaks with divine authority, and searches Nicodemus' heart.

Nicodemus, this night, you must be born again.

But we discover Nicodemus has some questions. Let's have a look at them. He has questions, but Jesus has answers. And I imagine they're not the answers that Nicodemus expected, because Jesus goes straight to the soul and exposes the deepest need in Nicodemus' heart, unless one is born again.

So, brothers and sisters, notice the simple fact this morning. Listen. Nicodemus comes. That speaks volumes. He comes to Jesus.

He is not content to remain a bystander, merely observing from a distance like so many others in his day. He isn't satisfied just to analyze Jesus, listening to him, or listening to what other people are saying about him.

[9:39] He's not willing just to stay within the safety of the synagogue. He comes. It's beautiful. He comes personally. He comes deliberately. He comes to speak with Jesus.

And that in itself is commendable. We must see that. He comes. Because Jesus bids an invitation even to us. We'll think about it in a moment. to come to me, all you who are weak and heavy laden.

There are many in our day, aren't there? Perhaps even here in Syracuse, who would sit under the reading and preaching of God's word, who would observe the work of God, who would nod in agreement with sound teaching, but who never actually come to Christ.

They've listened. They might have even taken notes during Iife's sermons. Maybe they've taught others. But they've not come. How could that be?

That was the case with Nicodemus. He listened. He taught. He studied. He was a leader. And yet Jesus bids him come.

[10:49] So he does come here, verse 2. Rabbi, he says, we know you are a teacher. Look with me from God. For no one can do these signs, these miracles that you do, unless God is with them.

It's a remarkable statement. Do you notice it? But look closely. It's actually very patronizing. He comes at night in the safety of his high position, and he offers what amounts to an endorsement of Jesus.

He's basically saying to Jesus, I believe, Lord, you're legitimate. You passed the inspection. You do these miracles. I've concluded, Jesus, that you are from God.

And what does Jesus do? He doesn't have anything to do with it. Let's have a look at his response. Our Lord doesn't respond with flattery. He doesn't say, Oh, thank you, Rabbi Nicodemus.

Thank you, sir. Your support means a great deal to me. He doesn't say that, does he? Look at what he says in the text. He doesn't play politics. He doesn't do what Anglicans so often like to do, which is be nice.

[12:04] I had an archbishop once say to me, It's the curse of Anglicanism. We like to be nice to everyone. Jesus doesn't do that.

He doesn't even elevate Nicodemus' reputation. He goes straight to the heart of the matter, and he responds and says, Truly I say unto you, Nicodemus, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus came to commend a teacher, but what he needed was a saviour. Do you see? And do not we need the same?

How different this is from others in the Gospels who came to Jesus not with condemnation, but with desperation. Think of the men, the lepers, how they come to Jesus.

Think of the Gentile woman, how she pleaded with Jesus. Think of the demon-possessed, how they came to Jesus. They come not to affirm him, but to plead with him.

[13:08] Son of David, they would often say. Have mercy, have mercy on me. That's different. Nicodemus approaches Jesus as if two equals are conversing, the rabbi from Galilee and the teacher from Jerusalem and Jesus strips away every illusion.

He pairs into the very soul of Nicodemus and he says, you are not even close. All your learned training. You are not safe.

You must be born again. And this is how Jesus still deals with us. Let's not lose sight of this. He doesn't flatter. He exposes. He doesn't simply teach the curious.

He confronts the soul. You see, this is, and Ithe's been helping me with this on another matter during the week. This is why we must just teach the gospel the way it is. It's why we must just share the gospel the way it is rather than making it polite to those who are around us.

Every person in this room entered the world in a state of spiritual death. As Paul writes in Romans chapter 8, the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God for it does not submit to God's law.

[14:27] Indeed, it cannot. We too must be born again. This is not an optional extra. Now, I don't know all of you.

I know some of you quite well. But perhaps some of you, like Nicodemus, were born into extraordinary privilege. Perhaps you were raised in Christian homes, received the sign of the covenant, taught to pray at a young age, catechized, disciplined in love, surrounded by the means of grace, and thank God for that.

But your natural birth, even with all those benefits, leaves you spiritually dead. It's rather unpleasant to say, isn't it? David says that in Psalm 51.

Think of how the psalmist of Israel rehearses this truth. He says, In sin did my mother conceive me. Cramner, the author of the prayer book, says the same thing to us.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we've done those things which we ought not to have done. We are miserable sinners. It's an acknowledgement of our inherited sinfulness.

[15:39] Yes, our parents may have been followers of Christ. We may have received the sign of living as disciples of Christ in baptism, being catechized, taught the scriptures, raised in the church, and yet apart from spiritual transformation, we remain outside, dead to sin, blind to truth, unable to

turn to God, and unwilling to do so.

We need resurrection. We too must be born again. I referenced Archbishop Cramner just a few moments ago, the author of the book of Common Prayer, who would later die for his faith. He too insisted on the necessity of the inward renewal, the inward work of God the Holy Spirit. He says this when he teaches about baptism, that it's not the water that regenerates the person, it's the inward renewal of God the Holy Spirit.

He says this in his homily, set aside for Pentecost. Study those words. Think about the inward work of the Spirit in your own life. Jesus turns to Nicodemus, religious, respected, and says, Nicodemus, you cannot see the kingdom.

You cannot enter the kingdom unless you are born again. Brothers and sisters, let's be clear, even if a spiritually dead person could enter heaven in their unregenerate state, I believe they would hate it there in heaven.

[17:08] Don't you think? The holiness, the praise, the glory of God would offend them and repel them. It would be like taking a creature in the desert and dropping them into the depths of the sea.

An unregenerate person is not suited for the presence of God. So think of what's happening here.

This great scholar of Israel is standing before Jesus.

He receives a retort from Jesus. How does he respond? I'm a son of Abraham. I've kept the law.

I'm a teacher in Israel. What does Jesus say to him? You must be born again. And yet, praise God, this is not the end of the Nicodemus story.

We come across him later. Can you remember? Though he comes timidly and at night, at first, over time he grows into a bold disciple in John chapter 7.

[18:12] In fact, he speaks in Jesus' defense. Do you remember? At the very Sanhedrin of which he is a member. And by the time we reach John chapter 19, where do we find him?

With Joseph of Arimathea, taking down the crucified body of Jesus and burying it. He once came by night, but is now unashamed in the light of the day.

Contrast that with Judas, Iscariot. Judas walked openly with Christ in the day, performed miracles, preached in his name, and yet ended in betrayal and death.

Nicodemus began in secret, but ended in public loyalty and love. The lesson is clear. We must never despise the day of small beginnings. Some come haltingly, uncertainly, some come trembling before Christ.

The Lord who began a good work is faithful to bring it to completion. This is the necessity of new birth. Secondly, new birth is supernatural.

[19:17] Would you say supernatural? Supernatural. Say it again with me. Supernatural. So first, it's essential. Secondly, it's supernatural.

Let's go to the text quickly. Nicodemus asked the obvious question. Brenda and I read this through as we thought about the passage this morning. How can a man be born when he is old, born again? And Jesus answers with clarity, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. In other words, this new birth is not natural. It's supernatural. Jesus is drawing a very sharp contrast between the two births here.

One from below, the other from above. In fact, in the Greek of the New Testament here, the word being born again can also be translated being born from above.

[20:20] And in John's Gospel, it usually does mean that. It's not merely a lifestyle adjustment or moral improvement. It's not a conservative worldview or church affiliation or a decision to clean up your act.

This is nothing less than a sovereign act of God being born from above a new creation, Paul would describe it as. The natural man can no more give himself spiritual life than he can give himself physical life.

We see that in John chapter 1. Think of what we listen to on Christmas Day. Not born of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but born of God.

The Holy Spirit alone gives this life. The same God who creates the universe, who called light out of darkness in Genesis chapter 1, must speak life into a dead soul.

This is the irresistible creative power of God at work. You cannot give it to yourself as we would see in the book of Acts. You cannot buy it with money.

[21:30] as Simon Magnus would try to do. You know, there are some churches today that take a tuning fork and hit it on the table at 528 megahertz and they say, that's how you will invoke the Holy Spirit.

What garbage. What nonsense that is. No. This is a supernatural regeneration from God and from God alone.

Only He can do this. And it's not so much that it's about the sign. It's about the Spirit who alone gives new life.

And so Jesus says to Nicodemus, this orthodox, respected teacher in Israel, be born again. And He says to everyone of us here at Church of the Holy Trinity this morning, be born again.

The new birth is necessary. The new birth is supernatural. It's necessary because it's not optional. It's supernatural because it's the work of God the Holy Spirit.

[22:35] And finally, this morning, the new birth is fruitful. Would you say fruitful? Fruitful. Necessary, supernatural, and fruitful.

Look quickly with me at verse 8 of John chapter 3. Jesus talks about the wind. Try and picture this in your minds. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear it sound.

But you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Here's the point, brothers and sisters.

This new birth is unseen in its cause. But it's unmistakable in its effects.

Like the wind, the Spirit's work is sovereign and somewhat invisible. And yet, it leaves behind real evidence.

[23:38] What evidence are you leaving behind? Or the Spirit leaving behind in you? Where the Spirit has brought new life, there will be signs of new life.

We call that the fruit of the Spirit. Paul writes that in Galatians, doesn't he? It's a single fruit. If there's one part of it that's missing, there is a crisis in the life of the Christian.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. You see, the idea of someone claiming to be born again while living unchanged, continually indulging in sin, ignoring Christ's lordship, and resisting holiness is completely foreign to the New Testament.

And I hope that it's foreign to you. And I do hope that it's foreign to me. There is no such thing as a carnal Christian. the notion that someone can accept Jesus as Savior while rejecting him as Lord. That's spiritual deception. If there is no fruit, there is no root. If the heart is unchanged, the person remains dead in sin.

[25:02] Think about it. When a baby is born, what's the first thing you look for? You look for signs of life, don't you? Crying, breathing, wriggling, movement.

And so it is in the new birth with Christ. When God breathes spiritual life into the soul, the effects begin to show. Perhaps slowly, yes. Perhaps quietly, yes.

But they are real. John uses the image of the wind to explain this. He says you cannot see the wind, but you can hear it rustling in the trees, bending the grass, driving the clouds, and likewise we cannot see the new birth occur, but we can see the effects.

What are they? The brokenness of sin. Yes. The clinging to Christ, the desire for holiness, the love of God's word, the hunger for prayer, and the battle against the flesh.

And John doesn't stop there. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he would write another letter. In 1 John, which is essentially a diagnostic tool for the fruit of the Spirit in your life.

[26:15] And in that letter, he asks us, do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you repent of your sin and grieve over it? Do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Do you overcome the world, even when the culture presses in hard against you? And do you keep God's commandments? Sure, not perfectly, but sincerely.

These are the evidences of being born again. Where there is new birth, there is new obedience, not to earn God's favor, but because grace has taken hold and taken root in your life, and you are bearing the fruit of the Spirit.

Well, we must conclude. And we conclude just at the same place where Jesus leaves Nicodemus. And where is it?

We conclude with a question. Not a theological exam. Nicodemus could have passed all those. He was a teacher of Israel, a member of the Sanhedrin.

[27:24] He could have passed those with distinction. The question is personal. It's direct, and it's eternal. here it is.

Are you ready for it? Are you born again? That's the question. Not, have you changed your behavior?

Not, do you belong to Holy Trinity Church? Not, have you adopted a Christian worldview? Not, have you been to theological college? but have you been made alive by the Spirit of God?

If your answer is yes, then bless the Lord. May God give you grace to persevere in faith and walk in grace and bear the fruit of His glory.

If your answer is no, or you're unsure, then take no rest until this matter is settled between you and God.

[28:24] Do not delay. do not assume you have more time. The call of Christ is not to adjust your lifestyle, but to receive new life from above.

So pray even now, Lord, Lord, give me a new heart. Grant me your Holy Spirit the gifts of repentance and faith, and create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. And may the Holy Spirit bring that new life, today. Even here, for his glory, for the joy of your soul. You must be born again.

It's not optional, brothers and sisters. You must be born again. It's the supernatural work of God the Holy Spirit.

You must be born again. God's God's fruit in your life. Let's pray.

[29:35] O gracious Lord and God, we confess that you are infinitely wise, and you've brought about a great work of salvation through your Son.

you have lovingly come, as you did with Nicodemus, stooping to us, warning us, instructing us, exhorting us about the most fundamental necessities of our life.

And so God, grant that we would be born again. Give to those who are here under the ministry of your word the indispensable gifts. grant, almighty God, that you would work irresistibly by the Holy Spirit in each of our souls, and that you would be pleased, O Lord, to deal by grace with needy sinners like us.

Have mercy upon us, Lord, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.