John 3:1-15

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Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0:00] Amen. Please pray with me. My God, who's given unto us your only begotten Son to take our nature upon him,!

as at this time to be born of a pure virgin, grant that we being regenerate and made your children by adoption and grace may daily be renewed by the Holy Spirit.
Through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen. Please be seated.
Good morning again. I wonder if that prayer that I just prayed seemed out of place to you. It should have, because it's one of our prayers for the day of Christmas.
You might have recognized that with one of the phrases in here, which is, at this time to be born of a pure virgin. But the reason I chose to pray this is because of our text today, which features another word that's in this prayer, which is, grant that we being regenerate.
[1:19] And the major theme of this morning's text and sermon is about the life that God generates actually in us that we can't actually do for ourselves.

And so that's the big theme, but there's a lot more in this, and I know you're pretty familiar with this John chapter 3 text. And so let's have a look at this as we continue our series here at St. John's, which is called Encounters with Jesus.
The Gospel of John records a number of signs and miracles, but more than signs, there are conversations that Jesus has with others as he encounters them and they encounter him.
Today's account is the first of many personal conversations between Jesus and another person.
Previously, Jesus' ministry and message was quite public in general, but now we actually see Jesus get very personal with people.
Of course, previously, there were these signs, the Canaan miracle turning water to wine. There was the temple canceling, turning over the tables of worship. Now Jesus gets personal and up front.
[2:29] And he starts with this very influential religious leader. His name is Nicodemus, and if you live today, you probably would have been followed by millions on social media.

He's a real influencer. Jesus' message to Nicodemus and us is, though, that Jesus knows us and he wants us to know him.
First, we'll find out in this text of two things about Jesus and what he knows of us, and that is that our biological birth isn't enough.
We need a spiritual birth. Secondly, we condemn ourselves, and we're in great need of salvation.
We don't know we need this, but Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves.
In fact, if you look at your Bibles, just before chapter 3, verse 1, the end of it in chapter 2, we learn just how much it is that Jesus knows and the implication and the impact of that.
[3:30] In those verses before, Jesus' mind is actually expressed through John in these words, but Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them because he knew all people.

This whole idea of knew or know or known is a major theme in the Gospel of John, which I actually hadn't seen before about a week ago, reading and preparing this.
And I encourage you, actually, as you come to St. John Sunday following these, to read the text and just notice when the word know or knew comes up in this. But here's the first thing.
It's one of two contrasts, and the first contrast is this, that Jesus knows that biological birth is not enough, that we need a spiritual birth. And so Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night.
Nicodemus was a Pharisee who believed in the authority of the Old Testament, and he was not only a Pharisee, but he was a ruler. That's what it says in verse 1. And he was the teacher of Israel, verse 10.

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[4:34] He's not an emperor or a governor or a president or a commissioner or a centurion, but he's a teacher, ruler. Now think of the greatest teacher, ruler of our time.

Who might that be? You might be able to fill that blank in. But Nicodemus does what all good teachers did then and now. So he has this kind of hypothesis, and he says, Rabbi, we know, there's that word, he thinks he knows, not only him but others behind him who aren't with him that night as he's by himself, that you are a teacher that come from God.
For no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. Well, what are the signs that he's referring to? He's seen two so far already mentioned, but the water into wine and the temple canceling sign.
Therefore, Jesus is a teacher come from God, Nicodemus believes. And the Pharisees, in verse 2, he says, know this.
But I wonder, do they? Do they really know who Jesus is? Do we know who he is? Well, this is kind of like two teachers facing off with the hockey season coming upon us, I know.
[5:53] Or maybe it already is, but I know we're not out of baseball season yet. Soccer season. This isn't, though, like Sidney Crosby or Connor McDavid facing off.

The problem is, Nicodemus thinks he knows Jesus because of the signs that he's actually shown, and therefore, Jesus has come from God. If you were Jesus, how would you respond to Nicodemus' statement, his hypothesis?
Some of you, I know, probably are teachers, primary, secondary, post-secondary, professional. How would you respond to this statement that Nicodemus makes? I would have never guessed that he would take the conversation in this direction.
He introduces this subject of, or this image of birth. And then he states two statements that are almost identical in verse 3 and 5.
You can look down. He says, truly, truly, and then continues on with, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus makes a statement, and Jesus again says, truly, truly, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.
[7:09] Nicodemus is confused, and so he asks, how can a man be born when he's old? Thinks he's pretty smart, maybe, or maybe it's genuine.

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? We, like Nicodemus, try to make sense of what Jesus is saying here. We're all like that when it comes to faith and knowledge and belief.
Jesus likely has our first reading in mind that Caleb read in the back of his mind from Ezekiel. I'll just reread some of this. The prophet says, from the Lord, 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 of flesh. And then he says, and I will put my spirit within you. Jesus is offering to Nicodemus and to us as well a heart transplant like no cardiologist can give.
Some of you, I know, probably have had some up close and personal experience with cardiac surgery. I don't know that there's anyone in the room with having had a heart transplant, maybe other organ transplants, but Jesus is making a really big promise and point here when he speaks to Nicodemus this way.
[8:34] And so, he knows the heart of men and women who are in need of some kind of radical remedy. And so, Jesus continues with these words. That which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of spirit is spirit.

Do not marvel that I have said, you must be born again. That's the third time he says it. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear it sound, but you do not, here's this word again, know where it comes from or where it goes.
So it is with everyone who's born of the spirit. Jesus is saying, we don't know. But he knows what we need. I ever wonder if that's what it's like for you.
You're kind of going through life, facing distress or even things of delight, thinking that you actually know. I thought I knew that I was going to stay here for a while.
Little did I know that I'd be going somewhere else called Kelowna. I thought I knew, but I didn't. But now I follow. Well, in other words, what Jesus is saying is that our biological birth isn't enough.
[9:45] We need a spiritual birth. A spiritual birth or being born again means life, and here's this word, generated by God alone.

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Now, a male and a female generate a child who enters this world. However, only God can generate children who can enter into his kingdom, his realm, his monarchy, his life, eternal life, with him. He's the one who generates that and only he can. And so this being born again isn't just like turning over a new leaf or making a resolution or giving up one thing and taking on something else that's positive.
No, no, no. It's only God's spirit in our hearts that can generate this life that's eternal now and forever. So Niconeebus doesn't understand what Jesus knows.
He seeks understanding for sure. In verse 9, he says, well, how can these things be? And Jesus is either shocked or he's just kind of testing Nicodemus.
[10:55] Whatever the case, Jesus expected more from the teacher of Israel. So Jesus does all he can to help Nicodemus not only know now but believe in him.

And this comes in verses 11 to 14. The conversation shifts. Just a little bit. From birth to belief. Eight times Jesus uses the word born.
Seven times he uses the word belief. And then he exhorts Nicodemus saying, truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we, here's the word again, know and bear witness to what we have seen. But you do not receive our testimony. Maybe the testimony of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But Jesus knows and Nicodemus doesn't what it takes to believe.
And I think we're the same as Nicodemus. At some point in our life, maybe it was in the past, maybe it's right now, maybe it's coming in the future, don't put it off, but the only way to believe is to receive the testimony of Jesus.
[12:02] That's what he's saying. Receive the testimony of God about his Son then comes through belief. There's a famous Christian named Anselm once who captured this very well saying, I believed so that I may understand or know you could submit there.

This is a hard saying that Jesus is saying, inviting them to take him for his word, the testimony. But in order to be born again of water and of spirit which leads to belief and internal life, it means trusting Jesus at his word for who he says that he is.
And this comes by the grace of God which enables us to believe. It's not something that we kind of pull up from underneath, it's something that's given to us from outside. And so how does this happen?
Well, Jesus then points backwards and forwards. He points backwards to Exodus 14 and forward to his crucifixion also in verse 14.
You see, the Israelites were delivered from Egypt and led into the wilderness but they suffered, I don't know if you remember this, a bunch of snake bites and they call out to the Lord. They want to be delivered from this in the wilderness and the snakes have lots of kind of symbolism and significance for them but it's caused a great fear to them of course because it's threatened their life and what are they going to do?
[13:28] How are they going to survive this? Not only thinking about Egypt when they were let out by Exodus but the snakes and the significance of the Egyptians of course there's the snake in the garden back in Genesis as well.

So what happens is then they believe in God's word as he told them to make a bronze snake put it on a wooden pole and look up and if they did they would be delivered.
So that which threatened them no longer did as they faced it but only because they trusted in God's word. So then Jesus then points to the work of deliverance yet to come as he like the like the snake was lifted up although he's going to be lifted up on the cross now and it's his death on the cross that will deliver believers from sin and give eternal life.
He spells this out in verses 17 through 19. So that's the first contrast but let's look at the second contrast now as we finish these verses more briefly. What does Jesus know now?
That is that we do condemn ourselves and that we need salvation. Now if you look back to verse 16 I bet you could recite this from memory without looking down and I'll ask you to do this.
[14:47] What does verse 16 say? For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Now let me ask you to not look down and recite verse 17 for me. We can't do that can we? But it is such a good verse and it goes for God did not send his son into the world to condemn it what a relief right?

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But in order that the world might be saved through him whoever believes in him there's that word believe is not condemned but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God.
So this is the second contrast it's condemnation versus salvation salvation through the son of God that is Jesus deals with our self condemnation verse 16 is so popular that we forget what comes before but especially after it as I've just read and remember this this section is spoken to Nicodemus this promise from verse 13 that we all know by memory we've seen used as a placard at sporting events it's sometimes used as a as a label right for a certain kind of Christian as if there are different kinds of Christians sometimes it even gets politicized as well well it was shared with a man and a man who is very religious who thinks actually that eternal life begins with him what it is that he does or what it is that he has done but Jesus didn't come to condemn him
Jesus' purpose as God's only son very clearly is to save to redeem to regenerate and all we have to do is believe by grace in Jesus and who he is and that he actually knows more than us he really is omniscient and that's just what we need from a savior well Jesus then highlights this condemnation and salvation with another contrast if you're counting I know it's a third one but it's still a part of this condemnation versus salvation and it's between light and darkness and so Jesus assigns any work that we think will secure life eternal life for us as darkness as he says then light has come into the world but then he also says we wander into darkness and when we do we love the darkness rather than the light we hate the light and do not come into it and this is hard and heavy to hear [17:48] I know but here's the good news of the gospel in the final line in verse 21 he says but continues on and then we come into the light so that here's the aspiration or the purpose the explanation that we may clearly be seen that our works have been carried out in God it's not our works but his works in us his great work of dying rising again ascending into heaven and all the other works that he's prepared in us for advance and so there there's then no condemnation just love Charles Wesley's hymn I don't know if you know this one I'm sure you do we sing it every good Friday it seems called and can it be the fifth stanza goes no condemnation now I dread Jesus and all in him is mine just think about that no condemnation now salvation all of him in us all of us in him saved preserved protected given a great sense of purpose and so this is the outcome of the coming of the light of Christ which is of course another huge theme that we've already actually heard about in chapter 1 verse 4 where Jesus is described as the light of men but also it's going to come up again in chapter 8 verse 12 when we're going to leave that

Jesus is saying identifying himself as the light of the world well there's a lot of darkness in the world we know right there's war there's poverty there are disasters there are personal distresses Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and in the dark slowly he moves from darkness into the light gradually and sometimes suddenly it happens for any one of us we sometimes identify when this moment happened of being born again and believing and coming into the light I can even identify a date for myself but other people can't and that doesn't actually matter what happens is there is a before there is that time when it happens and continues to be worked out actually in our life over time as Jesus shines the light into our life and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves so he's come to give us this new life to save us and to be that light for us so those are the two kind of contrasts those are the two things that Jesus knows about us maybe you know about yourself hard to admit to accept his forgiveness and freedom for service of who he is and in his kingdom as it reigns here on earth and forever let me just finish with a question and I think it does come down to this word that keeps getting repeated in addition to the other ones which is to know
Jesus knows us and in John's gospel he has not entrusted or committed himself to the world but a time will come actually when he does entrust himself in the Roman and the religious leaders all people will call for his death and so my question is then how are we with letting Jesus know us remember Genesis God creates man male and female he creates them and then from the snake they take the apple they eat it and then they hide they don't want to be known God comes to them and asks them where did you go he didn't say what did you do why did you do it he didn't shame them they already experienced that they didn't want to let themselves be known so today and this morning is an opportunity to encounter Jesus as he encounters us who knows all about us longs for us to be born again and to believe and to receive him as the light of this world but also the light in our life and it's so easy to hide and not want to be known but my great privilege at this church which is coming to an end in just three days is this is a beautiful community that's joy filled and you haven't hid yourselves from me especially when facing your greatest adversities sometimes which means

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right up to and at the time and through death so I'm grateful and it's been a privilege for me to be there for you at this time not all of you
I don't have to be there for all of you there's others of you who can be there for you at times like that that's needed but one thing's for sure Jesus knows you he doesn't love you any more or less in the past in the present and the future he always loves you where you're at now knows you fully and knows what's best for you and that is that we might be born again believe in him and come into his light and be saved I speak to you in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit Amen

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