

## **John: Born of Water and the Spirit** Sunday, 3/20/22

Last week we revisited some perplexing miracles that are unique to John by looking at some overlooked details and allowing ourselves to see meaning we may have overlooked before. Each miracle John records is a sign pointing to Jesus as the incarnate Word of God. Today we'll look at another story that's only found in John's Gospel. As we do so, let's see if we can discover how it advances his goal that we "believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him [we] will have life by the power of his name."<sup>1</sup>

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is full of confusion, both on the part of Nicodemus and the modern reader. While we can't help poor Nicodemus, we can at least get our minds a little straighter on what's going on. Nicodemus begins with an implied question: How is it that God's presence is with you? Who are you that you are able to perform these miraculous signs? He seems to be asking Jesus to affirm that he is a prophet sent by God. But Jesus wasn't having the direct approach, and instead of answering his question, he gives this enigmatic reply: "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."<sup>2</sup>

It's easy for us to read that today and assume all sorts of things about what it means. We've all heard the expression "born again" used to refer to evangelical Christians, where rebirth is a metaphor for conversion into the Christian faith. But that's modern usage that we're importing into this text, so let's hit the pause button and remember that Nicodemus didn't share that understanding. What might have been going through his head when he heard the expression "born again?"

As inconvenient as it can be, sometimes it really is necessary to go back to the original languages, in this case Greek. It's possible that this conversation took place in Aramaic, but it's equally possible it took place in Greek, as Jesus was known to teach in Greek, which is also the language the Gospel of John was written in.<sup>3</sup> In any case, Nicodemus was clearly confused, and John's clever use of a Greek pun puts a punctuation mark on that.

The initial confusion centers on the word Jesus used that the NRSV translated as

---

<sup>1</sup> John 20:30-31. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

<sup>2</sup> John 3:3. New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> <https://bible.org/question/what-language-did-conversation-between-jesus-and-nicodemus-happen>

“born from above.” The same word could also mean “from the beginning,” “for a long time,” and “again” or “anew.”<sup>4</sup> It’s the last one that Nicodemus seems to assume: “born again” or “born anew.” That’s why Nicodemus goes off the rails about entering into a mother’s womb for the second time. Jesus may have equally meant both “born from above” and “born again,” in the spiritual sense of conversion, but clearly Nicodemus heard “born again,” serving as the perfect foil to Jesus’s sermon.

Jesus tries again, this time clarifying with the phrase “born of water and the Spirit.” There’s no doubt that Jesus was referring to baptism this time, the specific ritual that the Christian church has always used as a rite of spiritual conversion. Bear in mind that baptism was practiced before Jesus arrived on the scene. Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, would have been aware of the Jewish practice of baptism for Gentile converts to wash them from the impurities of the lives prior to conversion to Judaism. The Jewish baptism of Gentiles was a spiritual rebirth, and Rabbis wrote metaphorically about such converts as becoming like children again.<sup>5</sup> And yet, it apparently never occurs to Nicodemus, that he, a Jew, might need to be converted to anything other than what he already has in order to belong to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus confounds Nicodemus further with another Greek word play, this time with the word *pneuma*, from which we get English words like “pneumatic.” It can mean either wind, breath, or spirit, and Jesus appears to use it in two of those senses, back to back, in verse 6, “what is born of the Spirit is spirit,” and in verse 8, “The wind blows where it chooses.” His point was that the rebirth needed by Nicodemus was a spiritual one that’s controlled by the powers from above, not by the earthy rituals of the Pharisees. By now Nicodemus is thoroughly confused, and he responds, “How can these things be?”<sup>6</sup> Can you blame him?

By the way, do you remember all those references in the prologue to the creation accounts of Genesis? Here’s another tie in for you. In the New Revised Standard Version of Genesis 1:2 we read, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” In the New Living Translation, we find, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.”

---

<sup>4</sup> Fredrick Danker (ed.) *BDAG: A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Ed.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Keener. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, p. 270. IntersVarsity.

<sup>6</sup> John 3:9. New Revised Standard Version.

Which one was it? A wind or God's Spirit? Maybe both? In my opinion, in John 3 we find the incarnate Word once again taking us back to creation and that all too-often neglected person of the trinity, the Holy Spirit.

Let's finish John's account of this conversation now. I'm picking it up in verse 11.

{Read John 3:11-21 NRSV}

“For God so loved the world...” Did you know that this conversation with Nicodemus is the context from which John 3:16 comes from? We used to see that citation on banners at sporting events, or even on the faces of players like in this photo of Tim Tebow, who used his celebrity to talk about his faith.<sup>7</sup> Some of you have memorized that passage, in one translation or another. It's heart-warming and cuts to the core of John's Gospel. We find life by believing in Jesus, the Son of God, who's life and death are the ultimate expression of God's love for us. But we usually only hear one or two verses of the passage. How might a broader understanding of this context shape our understanding of John 3:16?

Let's go back to John's prologue for a moment to remember that the word “light” is included six times in the first nine verses of his Gospel in reference to Jesus. We also read in verse 11, “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”<sup>8</sup> What we have here in 3:16 and the following verses is not just a feel-good affirmation of God's love, but a dramatic contrast between light and dark that John introduced in his prologue and now goes on to flesh out in greater detail for us. In fact, some commentators believe that the reason John wrote of Nicodemus in 3:2 that “[h]e came to Jesus by night” is to further dramatize the difference between the words of Jesus, the Light of the World, and the words of Nicodemus, the Pharisee coming under the cloak of darkness. There are many reasons Nicodemus may have arrived at night, but perhaps this is the reason John shares that detail with us.

So how, according to John, do we live in the light instead of the darkness? All the Gospels record Jesus as inviting others to follow him, including John. But instead of the act of following, John stresses in this passage the state of our hearts. That's why we read in John 3:16, “so that everyone who believes in him” rather than, “so that everyone who follows

---

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim\\_Tebow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Tebow)

<sup>8</sup> John 3:11. New Revised Standard Version.

him.”

According to John, there are two type of people, depending on their hearts: Those who believe in Jesus, the Son of God, and those who reject him; Those whose deeds are done in the name of God and consequently love the light, and those whose deeds are evil and consequently prefer the darkness; those who are saved will receive eternal life, and those who are condemned and will die; and harkening back to the prologue, those who have become children of God, and those who have rejected that adoption by rejecting Jesus and choosing to live their lives as strangers instead.

As you reflect on your own life, what’s the condition of your heart? Is it full of light or full of darkness? Full of Godly deeds or full of evil deeds? Eagerly embracing life or dreadfully fearing death? The good news is that as long as you still draw breath in this life, it’s not too late to take a step out of the darkness and into the light. No one’s heart is so dark that the love of Jesus can’t fill it with light.

I wish we could have heard more of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. What a shock Jesus must have been to he who had invested so much of his life to studying and teaching God’s law as he and his Jewish community understood it. We don’t get to read more, but we do learn in John 7:50 that the same Nicodemus stood up for Jesus in the Sanhedrin, and then again in John 19:39 that Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea place the body of Jesus in the tomb. We can’t know for sure, but I like to think what started in confusion and darkness for Nicodemus ended in belief, light, and life.

If it can happen to Nicodemus, it can happen to you. It’s so easy to condemn ourselves when all we can see are our failings. Jesus really does set a high standard for loving God and loving our neighbors. What’s weighing down your conscience today and keeping you in the dark? Confess that to Jesus, believe that Jesus has the desire and power to restore you. Ask to be reborn, by the waters of baptism and the Holy Spirit. Then set your feet on the path forward with Jesus, one step at a time. May it be so for each us as we take this Lenten journey together. Amen.

Please take some time now to reflect on your need and desire to live in the Light of Jesus.



609 8th St NW • Buffalo, MN 55313  
(763) 682-3538 • [www.buffaloumc.org](http://www.buffaloumc.org)

**Bill Reinhart, Pastor**  
[pastorbill@buffaloumc.com](mailto:pastorbill@buffaloumc.com)