

Second Baptist Church, Lincoln, NE, 2nd in Lent Year A, February 17, 2008,
Robert C. Molby Interim Pastor

Born Anew (Responsive Reading # 654, the New Birth)

Genesis 12:1-4a, The Call of Abraham (page 11)

John 3:1-17, Jesus Teaches Nicodemus (page 1051-1052) (NIV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. (2) He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." (3) Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (4) Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (5) Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. (6) What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' (8) The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (9) Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" (10) Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

(11) "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. (12) If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? (13) No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. (14) And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, (15) that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

(16) "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

(17) "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him..." (NRSV)

Stories unique to the Gospel of John:

- Jesus meeting with Nicodemus, 3:1-17
- The Samaritan Woman, 4:5-42 (look at next week)
- Man born blind, 9:1-41 (look at two weeks from today)
- The death of Lazarus, 11:1-45 (look at three weeks from today)

You must be born again.

- How many of you have heard that phrase?

- If you have never heard it before what does it mean to you when you hear that said?
- What it seemed to mean to Nicodemus.
- What did Jesus mean by using this phrase?
- One other place this phrase is used in the Bible. I Peter 1:23, "You have been born anew;"
- Other references in the Bible where it is implied: (Titus 3:5, "Renewal by the Holy Spirit;" James 1:5, "He gave us birth by the word of truth;" I John 3:9, "Those who have been born of God...")
- This is a central truth to our Christian faith; the rebirth of the inner person to one's true spiritual self.

Some metaphors here:

- Darkness and light
- Nicodemus and Jesus
- Literalist understanding of the Bible verses a deeper understanding of the Bible

Now really, like Nicodemus asked, how can one become born anew?

- First, is it necessary for our salvation to be born anew?
- Does being born anew happen only once?
- Can we become born again today, during this period of Lent?

How could Nicodemus become born anew?

- What did Jesus tell him?
 - ✓ Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, verse 2, and spoke about the presence of God.
 - ✓ Jesus told him he could not even **SEE** the Kingdom of God without being born anew.
 - ✓ Jesus told Nicodemus that it is the work of the Spirit to be born from above.
 - ✓ It is not something Nicodemus can do physically; it's impossible, like entering his mother's womb for the second time; this comes from above—from the Spirit—born anew!
- The illustration Jesus uses is the wind. (8) **The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.**
 - ✓ Being born from above will happen when the Spirit of God deems it so. You don't control the wind!
 - ✓ Jesus seems to be talking from experience—being born from above!

- ✓ Consider the story of Jesus' birth: we get hung up on the miracle of Jesus being born of a virgin when the real point is that Jesus was born from above! Consider it a metaphor!
- ✓ John 1:12-13: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man but of God."

Nicodemus represents the intellectual level of people in Jesus' day.

What do we know of Nicodemus?

- A Pharisee and a leader of the Jews who came to Jesus by night
- His last words to Jesus, verse 9 (Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"), imply that he does not make much progress in his thinking. If one is stuck in literalism, and preachers are as guilty as anyone (it's part of being human, you need to be born from above or born anew), you don't make much progress; you don't get beyond that literalistic interpretation. When someone is locked into a literalistic interpretation of the Scripture it means that they have not been born from above or born anew, at least in that passage of Scripture. Next Wednesday night I would like to examine a passage or some passages of Scripture in which we sometimes interpret in a literalistic way.
- Nicodemus is not able to recognize what Jesus offers and, more importantly, who Jesus is.
- Indeed, how can this be?
- Nicodemus just seems to disappear after this and we are left with Jesus talking to us. How will we fare?
- Will we understand Jesus any better than Nicodemus? Do we know what Jesus offers and who he is any better than Nicodemus? What makes us think that we do? Do we think we have more faith?

Nicodemus shows up two other times in the Gospel

- 7:50-52: he comes to Jesus' defense before other Pharisees.
- 19:38-42: he assists Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, in the burial of Jesus with bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes.
- Does this represent his coming to the light or is he still in the dark?
- It is not required of us to rescue Nicodemus nor does he ask for it. His encounter with Jesus suggests that faith is rather ambiguous. We talk about faith as in having faith, it is a done deal, but John never does. Faith in John is not a noun, not a possession. It is not something that one gets but it is something that one does. We need to ask more often than we are willing to admit, "How can these things be?"
- A professor of New Testament said: "We need to take seriously what faith looks like when it is active, living, permeable, and dynamic. We

need to consider earnestly that having a God who became flesh may require faith that becomes flesh – that believing is just as complicated as it is to be human.”

- I looked up the word “permeable” and discovered that the opposite meaning of that word is “watertight”. “Permeable” means “holey”, that it has holes in it, it won’t hold water. What does faith look like when it has holes in it?