

Title: Born Again  
Text: John 3:1-15  
Date: July 6, 2008  
Immanuel Baptist Church  
Chuck Queen, Pastor

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to engage Jesus in conversation at night. It could be that Nicodemus wants to avoid being seen talking to Jesus. Maybe he is afraid of a rumor getting started and afraid of what his peers will think. We know that some of the Pharisees were Jesus' most antagonistic opponents. So he comes at night. But keep in mind that this Gospel contains many words and expressions with double or multiple meanings. John is telling us that Nicodemus is still in the dark concerning the meaning and message of Jesus. This, I think, is true in some sense of all of us. When it comes to spiritual truth we are all trying to find our way out of the darkness.

Twice in the early part of the conversation Jesus emphasizes the need to be born anew or born from above. Here is another double meaning. The Greek word translated "again" can just as easily be translated "above"—which is probably its primary meaning in this context. Jesus is emphasizing the work of God, and the translation "born from above" puts the emphasis there. In v. 3 Jesus says, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again" or "from above." And in v. 5, after Nicodemus reveals how much in the dark he is, Jesus says, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit."

The reference to "water" is pretty vague and can be understood in a number of ways. It may refer to John's baptism, with the possible meaning that water baptism itself is not sufficient, there must be also be an emersion or indwelling by the Spirit. Or, another possibility is that water is a symbol for the Spirit, like wind is in our story. We could translate it one of two ways. It could read "born of water and wind" because the word for "Spirit" also means "wind"—another double meaning. Or it could be translated, "born of water, that is, the Spirit"—water being the symbol for the Sprit. And then too, still another possibility, which I think is the least likely of all the options, is that water is a reference to natural birth, so the meaning would be something like, "born naturally and spiritually."

At any rate Jesus is emphasizing that a work of God is necessary if we are to participate in God's kingdom on earth. We know from the other Gospels that the kingdom of God is something for this world, not a heavenly world. And it is present now on earth, but not in its fullness or completeness. Jesus is saying that if we are to "see" and "enter" the kingdom of God, if we are to experience and participate in the realm where God's justice and goodness and peace prevail, we must go through a new birth kind of experience that is of God.

This is an image, new birth or birth from above is a metaphor, a figurative expression that is not meant in a literal way and there are a number of different ways of understanding it. If we were to contend that there is only way of understanding this expression then we would follow in the steps of Nicodemus who could only think in a single category. Nicodemus could only think on one level and he misses it. And if we limit this expression to a single meaning we will miss it too.

Here's my way of understanding it (which is not the only way). New born babies experience the world as an extension of themselves. Newborns have no sense of self-consciousness. They get hungry, they get fed; they wet, they get changed, they cry, they get picked up. They are not self-aware—yet. But in the process of growing up they become more and more aware that the world is separate from themselves.

Every human being, if he or she is to be a healthy human being, must become self-aware. What happens in this process of becoming self-aware is that we also become self-centered. It's inevitable. There is no way around it. You can call this original sin (from a theological perspective), you explain this psychologically or socially or theologically, but it is inevitable. There is no ways to avoid this. It is the human condition. Every person who has ever lived in becoming a separate self becomes a self-centered self. There are no exceptions.

Something else happens too. We hear and receive “messages” about life from our parents, our siblings, our peers, our teachers, friends, people who are popular and have a certain charisma and influence over us—and the list goes on. There are many sources of influence in our lives. Through the influences of our culture we are socialized into a way of thinking and feeling and behaving. We get both good influence and bad influence—it's an imperfect process. And we know how difficult it is for those who get more negative messages and influence than positive ones—like children who grow up in abusive situations. It is more difficult for them.

So all of us develop a false self. The false self, is the self that is shaped and conferred upon us by our culture as we internalize all these messages and influence. For example, we may be socialized to think that our worth depends on our success, our winning the competition or earning recognition or honor. It's a false message, but it is a common one that many of us have internalized. These false messages shape our false self.

Marcus Borg tells the story about a little girl that made a strange request of her parents, just after they brought her new baby brother home from the hospital. She wanted to be alone with the baby with the door closed. This made her parents a bit uneasy, but they had just installed a new intercom system and so they agreed.

The little girl went into the baby's room, her parents listening ever so closely. They heard her footsteps moving across the room, and they imagined her standing over her brother's crib. And then they heard her say to her three-day-old baby brother, "Tell me about God—I've almost forgotten."

The story, says Borg, in a kind of evocative way, suggests that in the process of growing up, the process of being socialized into our world, we forget the One from whom we came and in whom we live. In the process of becoming self-aware we become less and less God aware; that in becoming self-conscious we become less and less God conscious and we experience this as a kind of separation from God, a kind of fallenness. Thus, the need to be born again, born from above, born of the Spirit—the need to be awakened to the reality of God in our lives.

In vv. 13-15 of our Gospel story an important element is included that is vital to this process. In v. 14 the text says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up"—a double meaning—lifted up in death and lifted up in vindication. The pattern of death and resurrection is the pattern of eternal life, it's the pattern for entering into and experiencing life in God's kingdom (which is what eternal life is). We die to the ego, we die to the false self, the self-centered self in order to live more conscious of God and God's love for all people. We die to self in order to live in God's kingdom. It is a pattern that must be repeated many times in the course of our journey with God and our life within God's kingdom.

Fred Craddock tells about running into a person who was a member of one of the churches in the Midwest that he got to know when he taught and ministered there. A grumpy sort, says Craddock, very controlling. Dr. Craddock gave Bible studies and preached in his church a lot. Craddock says that he was one that would act like he didn't know much, that he was in the background, but he knew everything and had his hand in everything and wanted to control as much as he could and set the agenda.

Dr. Craddock noticed that his friend looked different; he had a gleam in his eye. Craddock asked him how he was doing and he said, "Better than I've ever been." Craddock asked about the church and he said, "We're in better shape spiritually and in every way than we've been in my memory." Craddock asked about their minister and he said, "We have a woman." He never did give her name, but said, "We have a woman." Then he said, "I voted against her, and all my family voted against her, but we got outnumbered." Then he paused. "And . . ." said Craddock, waiting for the rest of the story. He said, "I was wrong. I was wrong in my estimation of women." And then he looked at Dr. Craddock and said, "Brother Fred, if I was wrong about her, I was probably wrong about a lot of other stuff too."

Dr. Craddock says, “Isn’t that great. Finally, he met the gospel, broke the pattern, and was making a new way.”

People can change. We can change. We can be born again and again and again and again. Jesus says, it is the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is like the wind, says Jesus, we cannot control it or manipulate it. Its source is outside human will and power. There is a mystery to the wind as there is to being born from above—by the Spirit. Dying to our ego and setting our heart and mind on the kingdom of God is a very human pattern, and yet it is a pattern inspired and empowered and experienced through the Spirit of God.

I cannot control the process of being born from above, of experiencing new awareness and spiritual life, but I can get myself ready—there are things I can do, I can prepare myself for God’s work in my life. I can take responsibility for looking deeply into my soul, for confessing my sins, for engaging in works of kindness, for reflecting on spiritual meanings and stories. I can’t control the Spirit, but I can do what I can do to make space for the Spirit so that the Spirit can do a divine work in my heart.

If any of us here today thinks that we don’t need to be born again, that we don’t need to change, that we don’t need any new awareness or new understanding or new experience—that this story is intended for someone else, but not us—well, I would say that if we believe that then we know less than what Nicodemus knew. Nicodemus came to Jesus saying, “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” He thought he knew a lot, but in the course of the conversation discovered that he didn’t know much at all. I think that is true for all of us.

Open your heart and mind. Be ready to die, to give up the ego. Give up the need to be right or the need to be first. Be willing to admit that you don’t know. Be humble before God and trust the Divine Spirit to do a good work, a new work in your life.

Gracious Lord,

We admit that there is so much we don’t know, and we cannot begin to know the mystery of how you work in our lives. But we know, that apart from your grace and Spirit we cannot and will not change. And yet we know too, that you don’t overwhelm us or coerce us or manipulate our decisions. May we each ponder our soul’s condition and the things that block the work of your Spirit in our lives; and help us, Lord, to remove these obstacles so that we can die to our ego and can walk in your love and compassion. May we each have many new birth experiences as we grow into the persons you have called us to be.