

“The New Birth”

Pastor Jacob Hanson

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## Opening Prayer

Good morning and welcome to KUMC/PCUMC. God willing you will find our church to be loving and God fearing in not just our words but also our actions. We are in the Lenten season, the time of the year where we focus upon the person of Jesus Christ. Beyond just answering questions about what God wants us to do, this time of the year we learn more about who it is that we worship. You might likely know that Jesus is our Savior, that it is by His blood that we are healed, that He is God in human flesh, etc. However in the Gospel of John, which is our main reading materials at least through Easter, we very much see the person of Jesus too. We can see His compassion, His love, how He fulfills scripture to a tee, and a whole lot more. If you want to grow in your faith during Lent, I would invite you to be reading the Gospel of John along with us. If you didn't pick up a sheet with the scripture plans ahead of service, please check by the door on your way out if you would like to follow along. This last week we started our journey through this Gospel by looking at John the Baptist and continued by talking about Jesus's first miracle (water into wine). Today we look at Jesus's first major teaching out of the Gospel of John: being born again.

Our story for today concerns an unlikely guy. In John 3:1-2 we read “Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’” We should understand that the man who came to visit Jesus wasn't a normal guy, Nicodemus was special. First of all, we should remember that he was a Pharisee. In our modern day church context, usually when we hear about someone being a Pharisee we think about them as being self-righteous, prideful, indignant, holier than thou, etc. We think that because Jesus called out many of the Pharisees for being that way, but we should also recognize that not every Pharisee was a bad guy. In fact the title “Pharisee” means “Separated One.” (Credit to prof. William Barclay for translation.) These were men who were trained in the scriptures from a young age. They held the Law, the Torah, the Levitical instructions, (basically God's given rules and laws in scripture) in ultimate regard. They followed the commands of the Lord to the letter as best they could, and they were the ultimate authorities for interpretation in Israel. Think about them like ministers or priests, but also lawyers. In the Jewish context of the time, these were the holy men who had made it their life's goal to serve the Lord and interpret the Lord's will for the people. Now if we are honest they often missed the forest for the trees, interpreting scripture in a way that was ultimately evil because they could make it fit the Law. (Need an example? Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath in Luke 6:6-11, and some Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus for “doing work” by healing the guy on a prescribed day of rest.) But it seems while many of the Pharisees ultimately used their positions for power and gain and simply tried to stay within the lines, Nicodemus shows us that there were also some Pharisees that were not so evil. In fact we read

that Nicodemus recognized that Jesus was at the very least sent from God, and he recognized him as “Rabbi”... teacher. Nicodemus, a well-educated Pharisee who sought out Jesus and recognized truth, is actually not so bad from what we can tell. But Jesus makes it clear that Nicodemus still has a long way to go, as he does not understand what it means to be “born again.”

In verse three we read “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’” If you have been around Christians much, you may have heard the term “born again.” This portion of scripture is where it comes from, and if we are honest many of us likely are as confused as Nicodemus is by this strange teaching Jesus gives. Of course Jesus is not referring to an actual second physical birth, that happens only once. But what He is talking about is a Spiritual birth, the beginning of a new life in the Spiritual sense.

If you want to think about it in a way that might make more sense for us today, it’s like when a pitcher makes it to the big leagues in baseball. That pitcher has probably been playing baseball his whole life, but his major league career only really begins once he makes it to the show. Likewise, Jesus is saying that our Christian life only truly begins when we follow the Lord. We may have prayed on and off our whole lives, we may have recognized that God existed or come to church, we may have been baptized as babies or gone through confirmation, but our Christian walk only really begins when we make it ours. Your faith really only grows once it has been “born,” when you take seriously and internalize and create a relationship with your Creator that He has been fostering within you for your whole life. The Lord is always at work within us we should recognize, and if you know any of the United Methodist teachings you may recognize that we agree with the thought of “prevenient grace.” (Basically that God is at work in us even before we become Christians.) However, until we take hold of that gift of salvation, until we follow Christ and proclaim Him as Lord; until that happens in us, we are only playing in the minors.

In verse six Jesus continues to teach Nicodemus by saying “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The Spirit that Jesus is talking about here is the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul makes mention of this later on in the Bible in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:50, where he tells us “Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” What does all this mean for Nicodemus? It means that God’s kingdom isn’t about just more of the same, but with the Romans defeated. Remember that is what the Jews were waiting for, for the promised Messiah to conquer the Romans and establish Israel as a great nation again. It is much bigger than that in reality though, God’s kingdom is about eternity. How do we inherit that kingdom? Or if we were to put it into our context, how do we enter the major leagues? Jesus gives us a clue in verses fourteen through seventeen.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Jesus is referring to His crucifixion there. The whole serpent/Moses thing comes from the book of Numbers chapter 21, where the Israelites had wandered away from God and were being bit by poisonous snakes for their trouble. The Lord provided them a way out though, by having Moses make a brass snake and put it up on a tall pole, and anyone who was bit could look upon the snake on a pole and live. (This by the way is the same symbol that is used for healing today.) The truth that Jesus is conveying to Nicodemus by relaying this well known Jewish story is that all of us are sick, bitten by sin and poisoned. Our lot is death... unless we put our faith in the Son of Man who takes our place. That is to say, unless we adhere to and follow the one who is lifted up in our stead. Verses fifteen and sixteen likely sound familiar to you, and they say plainly for Nicodemus and us what it is Jesus means. “So that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

Beloved, the word “Gospel” means “Good News.” This truth about where we find our salvation is the heart of the Gospel. To be born again, to have eternal salvation, to be saved from the sickness that is our own sin we have to look upon the Son of Man on the cross. We have to acknowledge that Jesus paid our price in His blood, that we are sinners, and that we are called to follow Him. This is important whether you have been the Lord’s your entire life or if you haven’t yet come to know your Savior. Recognize that Jesus came and died for you, so that you might spend eternity with Him in heaven, so that your sins might be paid for, so that you could then go and accomplish your purpose in life. Many of you probably already know this, it is the core of our faith. But, there is one last thing that we have to recognize in regards to being “born again,” and that is that we must grow.

Nicodemus, the main man in our story today, came to Jesus in the middle of the night because he was afraid to be associated with Jesus openly. He was afraid of being ridiculed by the other Pharisees, or maybe even worse, to be stripped of his place in society. Nicodemus as a Pharisee knew a whole lot about scripture; he could interpret the law well. He knew what you could and couldn’t do according to the rules, but as we read he didn’t know anything about the most important part of God’s plan for him. Jesus desired that Nicodemus would be “born again,” and place his faith in “The Son of Man” who would later die for his sins. Jesus wanted Nicodemus to follow Him. Joyfully, Nicodemus shows up one more time in the Gospel of John, when he asks for the body of Jesus. While here Nicodemus is afraid and unknowing about the truth, when we see him next he blatantly shows that he followed Jesus to everyone. Nicodemus, we can rightly assume, came to know and follow the Lord. He at some point put his faith in Jesus, was born again as a believer, and his faith grew to the point where he was willing to risk everything to bury Jesus rightly.

Nicodemus was born again as a Christian, and his faith grew. But what about you, and what about your faith? Do you know and recognize Jesus as your Savior? If not I would invite you to invite Him into your life and to be born again. This is what the Lord has had in mind for you your entire life, for you to follow Him. If you do know the Lord, if you have been born again,

are you growing in your faith? Has your faith increased at all in the last five years? Are you closer to the Lord now than you were as a child? If your faith hasn't grown, I would invite you to reinvigorate your Christian heart during this season of Lent by committing to intentionally following the Lord more thoroughly. You could do this by reading the scriptures we are studying, spending time daily with the Lord in prayer, or any number of other ways. Regardless, as we leave here this morning we should remember Jesus's teaching to Nicodemus that we should be born again... and that we should then grow from there. Let us pray.

### **Closing Prayer**