

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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John 3: 1-12

Do you want to be made new in your relationship with God? Do you want to be reborn in your thinking, view of the world, and way of relating to others in the world? Or are you pretty sure you are good? You have these figured out well enough. You are more right than wrong. It is others who need to wake up, sort of speak. Nicodemus strikes me as the type who could easily think and act in such a way. He is not a slouch. He has studied and taught his whole life. His life has been about faith and the seeking of God's presence, purposes, and plans for God's people. He is a learned and established teacher of the scriptures. While the gospel accounts portray many teachers and religious leaders of Jesus' day as ensconced and impenetrable to what Jesus is teaching and doing, that is not Nicodemus. He comes because he is a student of the things of God, and he sees God at work.

“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.” Nicodemus is attentive to the things of God, astute to where God is at work, and responsive. He watches Jesus, not with resistance but attentiveness to the signs that God is at work in Jesus. These are the things already true of Nicodemus. He's doing better than many already.

But to Nicodemus, Jesus responds, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” To which Nicodemus responds, “huh?!” Jesus requires a course of action that is not straightforward and immediately accomplishable. You must be born, an action one does not do for oneself, in case it has been a while, and you forgot. It is a kind of instruction that would drive an A-student nuts. Because it is not clear and straightforward. We don't know how to get an A. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” Nicodemus expresses his puzzlement, his dismay that Jesus is being hard to understand.

Now, the expression “born again” has its own history in Christian circles. In my upbringing, it had to do with conversion, the call to a moment of accepting Christ, and the public profession that one is now following Christ. It also connoted a type of Christian, perhaps. The true kind, the born-again kind, not the sleepy mainline kind. To be born again is to accept Christ and turn one's life over to Christ. And perhaps Jesus is calling Nicodemus to a type of conversion, to letting go of his

assumptions and credentials to experience the kingdom of God. But what I hear in this call to be born again, or born from above, is not necessarily that initial choice to follow Christ, or that initiation into the faith journey, nor the sign of a true follower verses and nominal one. I hear the invitation to a deeper encounter, heart renewal, real change, and healing and transformation. After all, we all know that one can accept Christ and still be a knucklehead. The journey is just beginning at that point.

I think of Nicodemus' question, can anyone be born again after having grown old? It is a good question, isn't it? Because as we get older, we might become set in our thinking. Our views and attitudes get calcified. Our habits and rhythms become predictable if not rigid. We don't necessarily want the recognizable patterns of our lives disrupted. We don't want our foundations tampered with. To have one's world up-ended may be more unsettling than inspiring. Even Nicodemus comes inquiring, but he does so at night. He's not committing to anything. He is not ready to have his daily life disturbed, to entertain rumors that he has anything to do with Jesus.

Perhaps David Whyte's poem helps us to begin to imagine what that rebirth that Jesus invites might look like. Perhaps his perspective might help us see the benefit, the pay-off. "I want to be born again," he says. He helps us through that wall of the unknown. Perhaps thinking about how one could live their days fuller and more whole and satisfied with the insights and changes that Christ can bring. To go back and re-live this life with the discoveries and character, and lessons one has accumulated. "I want to be born again" in the "self-same way" he says over and over. "I want to be born again so that I can hear / the familiar sounds again, but this time / know what I am hearing from the inside out." "But this time I want to deserve my youth, to study generosity, to watch my mind / grow supple."

Perhaps this way of thinking calls to mind how we would like to be born again, but don't know how. If you ever felt in a rut, if you wanted a deeper relationship but didn't know how to get there, perhaps you can relate. If you wanted to forgive others and yourself, but you can't get your emotions to line up. If you wanted the wisdom to navigate relationships and life-choices, but that wisdom only came much later. If you wanted to change behaviors, but you keep falling back into old patterns.

Whyte's perspective gets us started, to envision rebirth and better ways of living our days. But he also may blur the line between lessons and ways we grow that we might easily take credit for, sort of speak, with the change only God can do. I'm talking about those changes and transformations that we could never have

anticipated, the kind of growth and rebirth that only God could do in us. That feeling that we have been reborn, an action on our behalf, but not of our doing. That is part of the mixed message Jesus is giving. Be born. Do something that you are a passive participant in to some degree. No wonder Nicodemus is scratching his head.

If we kept reading, Jesus will say to Nicodemus that like Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man will be lifted up. That by beholding this symbol and sacrifice of hope and healing, one may be redeemed and healed. In the Old Testament story the Israelites in the wilderness, it is by looking at the golden image of the serpent on a pole that their bodies were physically healed of the snake bites. And so, Jesus says, we are invited to look upon the Son of Man lifted up on the cross for our own healing, forgiveness, and wholeness.

To be reborn. It is telling us the aim, the end-product, more than the steps. What would it look like to be reborn. I think of re-entering the world like a child, free of the hurts and traumas we have accumulated that are easily triggered. I think of being free of resentments and betrayals. I think of entering the world being confident of one's worth without the need to prove oneself or read one's resume. I think of a child able to be lifted up and hugged, not questioning one's place in a community. I think of relationships starting fresh because forgiveness has truly taken effect. I think of hope, free of cynicism.

Perhaps conceiving of rebirth is a start. However, there is a limitation to what we conceive. There is a limitation to Whyte's poem in that he calls to mind what we are aware of. These are the ways that rebirth has come about throughout our lives or ways we might envision. But what about the ways we need to be reborn that we are not yet aware of, that we have not yet discovered, or ways we have not yet been transformed, but that might change our way of living. This is what Nicodemus is confronted with.

I suppose this might trigger that protective instinct in us. We would like to be in charge of how we are going to change. But, like a child entering the world, this rebirth invites us to trust and to follow. Jesus is inviting us, even as he was inviting Nicodemus to access the grace, forgiveness, and hope found in Christ's sacrificial life, death, and resurrection. What Jesus aims for is not just the freeing of Israel or recruiting of followers but also the redemption, transformation, and rebirth of our hearts and souls.

And while we are made a child of God in a moment, the process of being reborn will take much longer, I suspect. Perhaps rebirth is gradual. Perhaps, as Whyte

suggests in the poem, that we only really become aware of this rebirth in retrospect. We look back and see where we have come, and we give thanks, and we commit ourselves to this rebirth, wanting to live into that promise that Paul articulates. If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.

And all God's people said...

**3** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup> 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?” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> “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. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?