

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**John 3:1-17, “How Do We Begin Again?”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson 3/2/2023**

Our theme this Lent is “Seeking: Honest Questions for a Deeper Faith.”

Which means that each week we’ll be asking some questions.

Last week we asked questions about temptation and testing,  
how we know the difference and how God works in us  
to develop a character that can respond faithfully.

During Lent we seek God together,  
reflecting on places in life where we might encounter  
the life of God in new ways.

Today we join another seeker named Nicodemus.

The question we ask with Nicodemus is: How do we begin again?

Most of us (myself included) like to think of ourselves  
as being open minded. That’s a good thing, right?  
We’re all free thinkers, right?

Well, it’s a good thing to aspire to, but when it comes down to it  
our views on the world are pretty-well fixed.

Let’s say I go to someone I really respect  
and I ask what they think about the world.

And they say to me,

“Matt, I’m sorry, but you’re all mixed up with your beliefs.  
It turns out we’re living in an Artificial Intelligence simulation.  
You’ll have to start over again with a whole  
new set of perspective on life.”

Well, I’m sorry, but even if that could be proven true,  
and even if I really respect this person, I’m not just going to accept it.  
It’s going to take me a while to think this kind of thing through,  
and honestly ... no.

At this point I'm not going in for a total restart.

How about you? Would you be ready to start over again  
with how you see the world?

If you're hesitating or resistant to saying "yes,"  
then you and I both have something in common with Nicodemus.

How do we begin again?

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which means he was an incredibly devout  
biblical scholar with a strong commitment to God and Biblical law.

But Nicodemus wasn't just any Pharisee, he was also  
a member of the Sanhedrin, which the TNIV helps us out with  
by calling it "the Jewish ruling council."

The Sanhedrin was a collection of 71 judges  
who made up the Jewish legislative body  
and the supreme court. Important folks.

This powerful man came to Jesus *at night*.

Coming to meet Jesus at night shows that Nicodemus was worried  
about either his Pharisee buddies,  
or his Sanhedrin buddies knowing  
that he was having a private conversation with Jesus.

What could Nicodemus have had to say that he was so worried about?

Even though he was clearly afraid of this encounter being seen,  
he also represents a group of some sort.

He says, "***we know that you are a teacher from God.***" *We know.*

This shows me that Nicodemus was providing Jesus with  
the insider consensus that nobody would admit to in public.

We see this constantly in public life:

Say one thing on camera, another thing in private.

Coming at night meant Nicodemus was giving Jesus his honest perspective.

And it meant that there were more like Nicodemus  
who were open to Jesus' ministry, but weren't brave enough  
to support him publicly.

In verse 3 Jesus goes all in:

**“Very truly I tell you, no one can see  
the Kingdom of God without being born...again.”**

At least that's how Nicodemus hears it.

The Greek word for again can also mean, “from above.”

In fact the NRSV translates it as “from above”  
in this verse and in verse seven.

Jesus is saying, “You need to be born *from above*  
to see the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus,  
you need a fresh start for your soul that only comes from God,  
not just getting excited because of the miracle's  
you see me perform.  
You need to be born *from above*.”

But Nicodemus takes it the other way.

He hears Jesus say, “you need to be born *again*.”

So he replies to the literal meaning of Jesus words,

**“How can anyone be born when they are old?  
Surely they cannot enter a second time  
into their mother's womb!”**

We join with Nicodemus in rejecting the call to start over  
completely from scratch!

But can we hear the playful invitation of Jesus?

We don't need to begin again,

we need to begin with a new perspective from above.

Rather than clear things up, Jesus comes back with still more word-play.

While Nicodemus speaks of someone *entering* their mother's womb  
(gross!), Jesus comes back with this,

**“Very truly I tell you, no one can *enter*  
the Kingdom of God without being born  
of water and the Spirit.”**

So Jesus is talking about what God desires to do,  
while Nicodemus is hearing the things that pertain to the world,  
and the impossibilities of starting over again  
*in your mother's womb.*

Jesus says in verse 7,

**“You shouldn't be surprised at my saying,  
“You must be born *from above.*”**

**The wind blows wherever it pleases—you hear its sound,  
but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.  
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**

Yet again, Jesus brings some puzzling language to Nicodemus.

Language that gets inside and subverts the way  
he and his group normally think.

The Greek word for “wind” and the Greek word  
for “Spirit” are the same word.

Is it just the wind that's blowing, or the Spirit that is directing?

Is the sound the whistle of the wind,  
or the word of God spoken through the only begotten Son?  
How have *you* been able to tell the difference?

Being born from above, getting a new start,

isn't something that can be programmed or planned out  
anymore than we can determine where the wind comes from  
or where it's going.

Those who truly follow Jesus don't just get wowed by his miracles,  
they don't just get caught up in his celebrity status (or lack of it),  
they submit themselves to be directed by the Spirit of God,  
wherever it might come from  
and wherever it might take them.

This is where the whole question of change comes back into the picture.

Am I able to change?

Really deep down is it possible for my entire sense of self,  
for the very source of my direction in life to be changed?

Is it possible for a whole group of people

like me to be made radically new from the inside out,  
to be born from above?

Nicodemus doesn't see how it's possible.

He says in verse 9, "How can this be?"

Jesus says, literally, "**You are *the* teacher of Israel,  
and you do not understand these things?**"

Many people think Jesus is saying here that  
what he has said should be clear to a master of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Perhaps it was Ezekiel 36 that Jesus was thinking of when he said this—

**"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.**

**I will remove from you your heart of stone  
and give you a heart of flesh.**

**And I will put my Spirit  
(which in Hebrew is the same word for wind)  
in you."**

**What about us?**

It's important to realize that as time goes on,

both individuals and communities fossilize and harden.

What are the words we aren't hearing as Jesus intends?

Where are we complaining that what Jesus says is impossible,

when really we need a new imagination

for joining where God is at work?

The traditional evangelical way of reading John 3:16

is that if you believe in Jesus, you're born again.

Well sure, I can go along with that.

So many of us are "born again."

But could it be that in our self-confidence and self-assurance

we have missed out on being "born from above"?

Are we trying, in some parts of who we are,

to make Jesus' words into something safe, controllable, and easy,

instead of seeking entrance to the Kingdom of God?

What part of your life would Jesus say,

"Look, I'm sorry, but you're going to need to start from the top.

That is...from above?"

Is it possible for a whole stubborn group of people like me  
or you to be changed? God certainly believes it is.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,  
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

...

Incidentally, later on in John's Gospel Nicodemus  
appears in the light of day.

He speaks up in public, and urges the Jewish leaders  
to hear from Jesus before passing judgment on him.  
Could the Wind have carried Nicodemus there?

And when Jesus' lifeless body is taken down from the cross,  
it is none other than Nicodemus who brings a mixture of spices  
and wraps the body of our Lord with them and strips of linen.  
Do you think he discerned where the Wind was blowing?

Could that leader of the Jews who was once puzzled by the words of Jesus  
have found a new birth from above  
that enabled him to enter the Kingdom of God?

The good news is that God did not send his Son into the world  
to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.  
That includes Nicodemus and you and me,  
and our neighbors as well.