

“The New Birth”

John 3:1-17

If you wanted to do something out in public without the rest of Kiel knowing about it....you might try doing that after dark. The cover of nightfall can help somewhat if you don't want everyone knowing about your personal business.

Nicodemus came to Jesus secretly by night for the very same reason, because he didn't want anyone to see him. It wouldn't have gone well for Nicodemus if his neighbors in town had seen him talking with Jesus.

Nicodemus was a religious leader with a reputation to uphold, and Jesus was this questionable character. He came to Jesus with a compliment. He said, *"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"* (Verse 2).

That was a compliment! Most of us would expect that Jesus would be swayed by such flattery! But He wasn't. He responds by telling Nicodemus: *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above"* (Verse 3).

This is where the term “born again” comes from. Other Bible translations like the NIV, use the words “born again.” But in the NRSV, it says “born from above.” Born from above means being born of God. Either way, Nicodemus correctly guessed that it meant a New Birth altogether...one that is separate and distinct from when he was born of his mother.

The question for us this morning is the very same question that Nicodemus asked Jesus. HOW? How can a person be “born from above?” How does a person get that New Birth? I mean we each one were born already, weren't we? How does it happen again?

Jesus answers that. He says ‘I'm not talking about being born of your mother -- that's already happened. What I'm talking about now is being born of God.’ I'm paraphrasing verse 6 where He says: *"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."*

A Catholic Bishop in France told the story of a group of ruffians who stood outside a cathedral and made fun of the people standing in line to confess their sins. They said, "So, you believe in forgiveness, do you? Well, there is nothing to it. It is a hoax. So,

you believe in Jesus, do you? He is a fake." One of the boys said to the leader of the gang, "I dare you to go in and tell the priest what we have been saying." "I'll do it," said the second boy and so he did. When he got to the priest, he said, "We have been mocking your parishioners outside and my friend dared me to come inside and tell you. We do not believe in forgiveness. We don't give a (blank) about Jesus. There, I have said it. Good-bye."

"Just a minute," said the old priest. "I have a dare for you too. Go to the altar, look up at the cross, and say, "Jesus died for me and I don't give a (blank)." "Is that all?" asked the ruffian. "Yes, just do it and come back and see me."

The young boy rushed down the aisle, looked up at the crucifix and said, "Jesus died for me and I don't give a blank." He went back to the priest and said, "I have done it. Now, good-bye." "Do it again," said the priest. "I don't want to do it again," said the smart aleck. "Afraid?" inquired the wise priest. "No," said the boy. Slowly he went down the center aisle of the church to the central figure of Jesus hanging on the cross. Once again, only this time more slowly, he said, "Jesus died for me and I don't give a blank." "Good-bye," he said to the priest. "Do it one more time and then you may go," said the priest. Very slowly the young boy walked down the aisle. When he got to the foot of the cross, he said, "Jesus died for me...." He broke down and knelt at the foot of the cross unable to raise his head.

The Bishop ended the story by saying, "I am that boy."

The obnoxious young boy who mocked other people's faith, grew up to become a Catholic Bishop who would embrace that very faith!

Friends, do you know what the New Birth actually is? It is this: ***It is a total reorientation from the world, to the kingdom of God.*** And it begins when we stop trusting in ourselves to save us, and we start in trusting in Christ. This is extremely important, so let me repeat it: ***The New Birth is a total reorientation from the world, to the kingdom of God.*** And it begins when we stop trusting in ourselves to save us, and we start trusting in Christ.

It doesn't mean that we ignore the world, it just means that we stop worshipping it....and instead we come to trust that Christ alone can save us.

Nicodemus didn't understand that. He didn't get it. He was just sort of "huh?" Jesus said to him (verse 10) "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" In another way, Jesus was telling him: "Look, Nicodemus, it's not about what you do -- it's about what **I** do!"

Jesus said to Nicodemus in verse 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.”*

Notice what Jesus didn't say. He didn't say, *“For God so loved the church....”* He said *“For God so loved the world.”* The whole world. Everybody. Those whom we love....and those whom we don't particularly care for.

“That he gave his only son....so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Jesus' death on the cross is what bought our admission ticket into heaven. That's why he said to Nicodemus (look in verses 14 & 15) *“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”* The cross of Christ is where we see God's judgment and God's grace poured out simultaneously.

The New Birth means that we trust in what Christ did for us -- not in what we can do for ourselves.

There is a story about a man who died and went up to the pearly gates. St. Peter was waiting for him. "I want to enter Heaven," said the man. "You may enter," replied Peter, "if you have accumulated 100 points on earth."

"Well," said the man, "I was baptized in the church and scarcely missed a Sunday in my entire life."

"That's good," said Peter. "That's one point!"

"One point? -- only one point? Well, I did serve on Consistory for 6 years, and I taught Sunday School for 25 years."

"That's good. Another point."

"What!? only one more point!? Well, I tried to live a good life. I tried to be a good father and husband."

"That's good," said Peter again. "That's worth one more point." "Oh, my," said the man. "The only way I will get into Heaven is by the Grace of God!"

"That's right!," said St. Peter with a smile on his face. "And that's worth 97 points. Come on in."

Nicodemus didn't understand this at first. *“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet do not understand these things?”* Jesus asks him.

The question to us is the same: "Do we not understand these things?" We can't earn our way into heaven. We can't rack up enough points. That's why we need to have the New Birth...and it comes only through faith in Christ. Amen.