

## **“Being Born From Above”**

John 3:1-21

February 13, 2022

Read John 3:1-21

This is the Word of the LORD.

When I was serving in Chula Vista a number of years ago, I was having a meeting with a staff person. He had with him his young son, Manny. Manny was probably four or five years old at the time.

Most of Manny’s contacts with me had been on Sunday night at our Spanish language service and also a few Sunday mornings. In the office I could tell he was looking at me, trying to place me because I was out of context. Basically, he had never seen me without a robe. I was kind of amused, watching Manny turning his head this way and that. Finally, after a couple of minutes, he spoke up.

“I know who you are,” he said, with serious look of conclusion on his face.

“Who am I?” I asked, playing along.

“You are the man from Christ.”

That stopped me. “From your lips to God’s ears, Manny. May everyone recognize me as the man from Christ.”

Friends, this is how you and I all should be known. We are the people from Christ. There is something qualitatively different about us that is visible to other people. It is not just that we act differently or do different things; it is more that there is something about us, something in us, something that is through us that is different.

This is what Jesus was telling Nicodemus, and this is why John includes this here in the gospel.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. John was making the point that Nicodemus was coming into the light from out of the darkness. Nicodemus came at night because Jesus was a controversial figure. He was doing amazing things but he was not following the traditional rules. Nicodemus was a prominent man of the establishment; and it would not have been politically prudent for him to be seen with this upstart. John called Nicodemus a “leader of the Jews.” Nicodemus tried to compliment Jesus; unfortunately, it came out a little awkward. “Rabbi (teacher), 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 called Jesus a teacher. A great teacher. You would think that Jesus would have liked that; however, Jesus did not accept it.

Jesus’ response was a kind of mild rebuke.

Jesus did not directly correct Nicodemus; rather, he said something that Nicodemus could not understand. Before we go onto the substance of what Jesus said – something that is probably familiar to many of you – I want you to pay attention to that rebuke. Why? Because these days, we hear it all the time: Jesus was a great teacher. In one respect that is true, in another more important way it misses the point.

C.S. Lewis, a popular British theologian, wrote,

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was more than just a teacher, more than just a moral guide.

In this passage, the gospel writer John was highlighting the start of the confrontation between Jesus and the worldly authorities; the confrontation that would ultimately lead them to crucify Jesus on the cross. John used this meeting to build on the tension that began to develop in the material about the cleansing of the temple. Here, Jesus gave three progressively longer responses to Nicodemus; each one revealing more and more about the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God.

First, Jesus linked the kingdom of God with being born again. Second, when Nicodemus did not understand, Jesus revealed that being born again into the kingdom of God included being washed clean in water (that is, baptism) and receiving the Holy Spirit. Third, as Nicodemus continued to be confused, Jesus cited an odd story from the time of the Exodus and wandering in the wilderness as an illustration.

In verse 14, Jesus said, "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 Moses story is found in Number 21:4-9, where the people muttered and murmured against Moses. The LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people who were complaining, and many were bit and many died. Some repented, and sought out Moses, confessing their sin and asking for relief. Moses prayed for the people. The LORD instructed Moses to make a serpent of bronze and set it up on a pole so that all who looked upon it would be relieved of the venom of the snakebite.

Do not miss the symbolism here: the serpent represented sin – sin like what occurred as a result of the subtle serpent's temptation in the Garden of Eden. The name "Moses" means "drawn out of";

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, The MacMillan Company, 1960, pp. 40-41.

in other words, God drew his people out of the land of slavery and bondage. In the desert, those who repented of their sin were relieved of the burden of it and were saved.

Jesus' point was that his death and resurrection would function like Moses lifting up the serpent; only in an eternal way. The people Moses saved ultimately died – they were not around when Jesus was talking to Nicodemus – but those who are saved through Jesus and join him in his “being lifted up” (that is, raised from the dead) will enjoy everlasting life in the kingdom of God.

The practical application is this: you must be born again.

If you have not committed your life to Christ, if you have not received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, if you do not confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead – friend, then you have not been born again.

If you are born again from above, does this mean you will never doubt? Not at all. Doubt is a part of a life of faith.

If you are born again from above, does this mean you will never sin again? No, though it would be great if it did. It does mean that you know the one who has begun a good work in you and who will draw you unto himself.

If you are born again from above, does it mean you have to live like John the Baptist, like a wild, tie-dyed hippie out in the wilderness eating only locusts, wearing hair shirts, and shouting at people to repent? Not unless God specifically calls you to that ministry – and very few are.

If you are born from above, does it mean you will not suffer or experience trials here and now? No. We only have to look to Jesus to see how that is not the case; in fact, suffering and trials are to be expected.

So what *does* it mean to be born again?

It means that the Holy Spirit has convicted your heart, brought you to a place of repentance, and you cling to Jesus as your Savior. You do not believe you are good enough or that you have earned a spot. You know that you are a sinner who is incapable of being righteous in God's eyes, and you know that you need to be saved. You are drowning in sin and need to be saved; you need a savior. The only savior, the only name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved is: Jesus.

Being born again means that Jesus is Lord of all aspects of your life. It means you desire and strive to live in a way that obeys his command, and you seek to please him. It means you “clothe yourself” in the ways of Jesus. In Colossians 3, Paul described it this way,

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved (set apart and loved by God – you have not done anything yet), clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive

each other; ...just as the Lord has forgiven you, you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Being born again means a new life – starting now – and lasting into the eternal kingdom of God.

These days, the church seems apologetic about the language of “born again.” For so many people, the “born again” movements of previous decades left a sour taste in their mouths – in large part because of the way those who claimed the banner “born again” acted. There was a pious judgmentalism that went with it; that somehow they were better and special. The implication was that you were somehow lesser and – well, let’s be honest – among the damned and not worthy of being engaged unless you joined in becoming exactly like them. You were a good target for their speeches, but not someone worthy of care and connection.

As a result, the church has turned to apologizing for Jesus. There is a reluctance – even an outright refusal – to understand what Jesus meant by “born again” for fear of being tagged with all the baggage. The result is that people stopped talking about Jesus and just assumed that everyone believed the same things. Unfortunately, the clergy has not been particularly helpful in this regard.

There is a designed lack of clarity about what we believe: clergy and leaders have convinced people that faith and theology are impossibly complex. When we ordain elders and deacons in the church, one of the things we ask is whether they “Will you receive, adopt, and be bound by the Essential Tenets of ECO as a reliable exposition of what Scripture teaches us to do and to believe, and will you be guided by them in your life and ministry?” In other words, we ask “Do you receive and adopt the essential tenets of the faith?” Yet, when we ask that question, we never follow up with, “And what are they?”

**Can you say what you believe?** For many people who claim the moniker “Christian,” there is an out-and-out refusal to identify what we are for – that is, what we profess affirmatively. We do not have a confident handle on what are the essential tenets of the faith other than to say that we have some. The current trend broadly is to identify the essential tenets as only experiential; that is to say, they are like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of obscenity, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be [essential]...but I know it when I see it.” In our denomination, we have taken a different approach – you may have heard it in the question posed, “Will you receive, adopt, *and be bound* by the Essential Tenets?”

Where there is a lack of clarity about what we believe, what substitutes is a kind of relative, foundation-less moralism. It becomes a work’s-based righteousness: do the right stuff, go to church, and be a good citizen and everything will be fine. Faith becomes all rules without having any basis for understanding why. Church becomes a face-less institution. If we cannot articulate what we believe and why, the rules we espouse seem mean-spirited and self-righteous. In short, it makes Christians act like Pharisees because the rules are the only thing we have to hold onto.

The second thing that has happened – and I have talked about this in the past – is that the clergy have convinced people that they should not even try to explain things because they might say something wrong. The professionalized clergy has convinced people that theology is complex, difficult to understand, and unless you know the Bible forward and backward – in original languages – you should not tell anyone about your faith. People think they need all the answers before they can begin the conversation; and many Christians are embarrassed by their lack of comprehensive knowledge. So, they say nothing about Jesus – ever – to anyone. In their heart of hearts, they anxiously hope they have it right. They come to church praying that God will count that as an act of faith sufficient to let them into heaven.

In my opinion, Douglas Coupland is one of the best writers of my generation. He was the writer who coined the term “Generation X.” One of his other books is entitled, “Life After God.” In the book, he chronicles the hopeless wanderings of a young, single, father who has grown up without the church and without God. Then, right toward the end, the protagonist confesses this:

Now – here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

In short, we have become just as lost as Nicodemus. But like Nicodemus, we have hope because – as Jesus revealed – God loves us.

Look at what Jesus is actually saying:

1. We are dead in our sins.
2. God loves us so much he took action to redeem us.
3. Being born again is to be made righteous.
4. Christ came not to condemn but to save those who believe in him.

John 3:16 may have become the punchline of jokes and it may be most remembered in the context of a sign held up at a sporting event; yet it is the heart of the gospel.

Nicodemus was struggling to get it right and you can tell that Jesus is helping him along the way. What Nicodemus missed up front was that Jesus not just teaching stuff, he was describing a qualitative difference.

What is the qualitative difference that being born again makes? Living into the reality of the Kingdom of God means that we see beyond the here and now. We do not ignore it, but we live it in the midst of the understanding that there is something more than what is apparent to us.

We live within the love of God, confident that God is sovereign and has acted to redeem us from the power of sin and death. We no longer face the destruction and death that results from living in

rebellion against God. No, we have been reconciled through God's gracious action We have hope. We have direction and purpose: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We have a mission.

Today is supposed to be our congregation's annual meeting. The annual report has been posted and is available. The important thing about that report and our meeting is this: we have the opportunity to share the stories – real life stories – of how God is using real people to transform lives. God has made a difference in their lives and in the lives of the people to whom they have been called to bear witness. God has been active and faithful this past year (and for all the years before that). Do we know how? Have we seen things we can share?

It is not just missionaries and it is not just ministers who have experienced the qualitative difference of being born again. Do you have eyes to see what God has done in your life? Will others see the difference in you?

“But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

“I know who you are.” You are the man from Christ. You are the woman from Christ.

Amen.

Hymn: “How Deep The Father's Love For Us”

Questions:

1. What does it mean to be “born again”? How would you explain what Jesus was saying to someone who only knows the term as culture uses it?
2. Why is being born again so important? If you do not have a “Damascus Road Experience” -- that is, if your life was not suddenly and shockingly upset by a miraculous encounter with the living God – how can you know you have been born again from above?
3. Do you have eyes to see what God has done in your life? Will (or do) others see that difference in you? How?