

Born of Water and Spirit©

Romans 4:1-5,13-17; John 3:1-17

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Rev. Sharlyn Gates

Second Sunday in Lent

How many of you were able to recite John 3:16 from memory without actually reading it? If ever there was a verse in the Bible that is memorized at an early age, it's surely this one!

But what does it actually say to you? What does it mean to you?

It's really an amazing statement, when you think about it. Jesus says God so loved – SO LOVED, loved the world SO MUCH – that he gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him would not die but would have eternal life.

But, why is that so amazing? If you grew up in Sunday School and worship you have probably heard all your life that God is love; God's love is unconditional. That Jesus died for our sins so we would be forgiven.

If you've heard it all your life, it might not be all that amazing to hear. But, it was to Nicodemus. And it was to many of the people in Jesus' day. And I think it is pretty amazing still today, if you really think about it.

So who was Nicodemus? And why did he go to Jesus at night, like he was sneaking around? Was he afraid to be seen? I like to refer to him as Nick at Night. A little "Nick Name" for this night time visitor.

Nicodemus probably *was* sneaking around to see Jesus because he was a Pharisee – one of those law abiding, law keeping religious leaders; kind of a lawyer who studied the Jewish laws and made sure everyone was keeping them. And if you didn't, you were outside of God's realm. You were unclean, unrighteous and unfit for the temple.

And to get *re*-clean, *re*-righteous and *re*-fit you had a long list of purifying, holy things to do. There was a lot of doing on the "to do" list of the law. Not really things *God* had given but things the scribes and Pharisees had written to make sure the law was kept.

So, with that in perspective, one can see how this conversation with Jesus was amazing to Nick. In fact, it's pretty amazing that he went to Jesus in the first place and that he said what he did about knowing Jesus must come from God because of all the miracles he performed.

When Jesus told him he must be born anew before he could see the Kingdom of God, that was baffling to someone who saw the Kingdom of God being something earned by keeping the law.

Of course, the whole metaphorical idea of being born again was even more baffling to this literalist. The Message translation puts it this way:

⁴ “How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”

⁵⁻⁶ Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.”

Lauren, can I borrow your baby for a minute, please?

Look at this beautiful child – Cole Matthew Hanson. Cole was born this past February to his parents – Lauren and Colin. He is the grandchild of Gordie and Peggy Dryer and the great grandchild of Bruce and Beth Dryer. Lauren is a daughter of this congregation.

Cole lives in Texas but is here today to be baptized in Lauren’s home church. Lauren, is childbirth a piece of cake? Is it easy?

Carrying a growing baby within, finally having contractions and delivering is not the easiest thing in life – yet it gives life. In all the pain and the struggle, in the messiness and the joy – comes new life!

But really, Jesus, is there some way to go back into the mother’s womb and do it again? Is there a mother out there who would really want that?

Yet, we look at this new young life and sometimes we WISH we could go back in time and be so innocent, so vulnerable, so fresh and new with our life all ahead of us. We wouldn’t mind a fresh start, would we? To be held again in our mother’s and father’s arms - to be fed and nurtured and cradled and rocked – to have a new chance to begin again?

Well, that is very much what Jesus is saying! You must be born of water and the Spirit – Jesus’ Spirit that is freeing, that blows where it will, that frees you from the burden of always trying to earn your salvation to just receiving the gift of salvation.

Today, Cole will be baptized and we believe that in baptism we are grafted into the Body of Christ; we are given this amazing gift of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us forever; that frees us from having to earn our way to just receiving the gift.

When we look at Cole, we see a baby, a small human. But what we don't see is the spiritual formation that is taking place within him by the Holy Spirit. We can't see the Spirit at work but we just believe that it is and as he grows that spiritual formation takes shape and becomes more and more obvious. (Give Cole back to parents)

In the sacrament of baptism we say that the water is an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace – born of water and of Spirit. It's not something *we* did, but something *God* did - a gift of grace that only God's Son could give.

The Message translates the Romans 4 text Bob read this way.

I'm reading just from verses 4-5: If you're a hard worker and do a good job, you deserve your pay; we don't call your wages a gift. But if you see that the job is too big for you, that it's something only *God* can do, and you trust him to do it—you could never do it for yourself no matter how hard and long you worked—well, that trusting-him-to-do-it is what gets you set right with God, *by* God. ***Sheer gift.***

This is the Good News in just a few verses!

1. God's love is amazing and a free gift of grace!
2. You can't work hard enough or long enough or be good enough for the Kingdom of God. But you don't have to because Jesus brings God's gift of grace to you. It's a free gift!
3. Jesus said God didn't send His Son into the world to condemn it but to save it, to redeem it, to free it from the slavery of sin and death and heartache and guilt. To give new life in the Spirit.
4. Jesus gives us His Spirit that does inspire us to believe, to follow, to accept this gift of love and to pay it forward to others in His name. To pass on the Good News.

Like a mother who carries and delivers her newborn baby, in this born again life of water and Spirit, God is bearing us up, carrying the weight of us – our burdens, our discouragement, our waywardness, our hopelessness and our failures. God is delivering us into new life and God does cradle and feed and nurture us.

We, in fact, we are given the amazing ability to let the past go and begin again in our new life in Christ.

Let's go back to Nicodemus again for a just a minute. In that moment in time, Nick at Night just didn't get it. He went silently back to his life of law keeping.

But, just as we never know when a seed is planted and how that seed of faith might grow in someone we've been talking to our praying with, the Holy Spirit was at work in Nicodemus.

The seed of faith that Jesus planted in him was growing and he became a believer. For it was Nicodemus who was there at the council when Jesus was tried, who defended him among his peers.

Nicodemus was there when Jesus was taken down from the cross, when Jesus' body that was bloody and broken needed to be wrapped and buried – he brought expensive oils of myrrh and aloe for the embalming according to Jewish customs.

It didn't appear to sink in that night with slowly Nicodemus began to see the Light.

Jesus said, ⁸"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."

The Spirit was blowing over Nicodemus and it blows over us and our friends too.

Believe the Good News. In Jesus we are born anew, born of water and of Spirit, forgiven and freed, as loved and cherished as a newborn infant, protected and guided all of our everlasting lives.

Believe in Jesus Christ as God's only Son, given to us out of an immeasurable amount of love from God, that all might have life forever and ever.

Remember this love as you walk the Lenten journey through the wilderness with the 3-D vision of Discipleship, Devotion and Dialog.