

the difference



John 3:1-9

Born Twice

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
John 3:1-9

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What is a **BORN AGAIN CHRISTIAN** ?

What is a *born-again Christian*? Mainstream media uses this phrase often enough that you'd think they could supply a working definition. I seriously doubt that

many in the media know what it means. Take the most recent presidential election. The media widely reported that four out of every five *born-again Christians* voted for Donald Trump. Again, I ask, what is a *born-again Christian*?

Some of you would identify yourself this way. It's a convenient way for you to communicate that you've had a conversion experience. Some of you use it to distinguish a real Christian from a nominal one. Others of you are wary of using the term. The term has become too closely identified with right-wing politics or overzealous believers for you to feel comfortable with using it.

I'm asking you to lay aside any preconceived notions of this phrase. We're not going to gain much traction if you insist on holding onto biases you have about the language of born-again. This sermon will explore what Jesus says about being born again. Since Jesus is the one who coins the phrase, he ought to have first dibs at explaining what he means.

Let me bring you back to our theme for these next five months in worship. Our plan is to read the Gospel of John together. Our purpose in reading John is not so you can locate Mesopotamia on a map or rattle off the names of the 12 disciples. Our goal is to discover the difference Jesus can make in our lives in 2017.

During Christmas, we looked at John's prologue to his gospel in chapter 1. Last Sunday, New Year's Day, in John 2, we read the story of Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding. Today, we come to the 3rd chapter of John's gospel. Since you were undoubtedly distracted during the holidays, you may be just now realizing how serious we are about camping out in John's gospel.

Here's what I want you to do this week: read the first three chapters of John. Consider it homework. We're talking 112 verses or 16 verses daily. You can do it!

Today's story centers on a man named Nicodemus. He's identified from the outset as a Pharisee (3:1). The Pharisees are a religious order of Jews committed to obeying all 613 laws of the first five books of the Bible called the Torah. Keep in mind these Pharisees have already been critical of John the Baptist (1:24) and Jesus (2:18).

In verse 1, Nicodemus is also identified as "a leader of the Jews." Most likely, he's a member of the Sanhedrin, a powerful political force in Israel, comparable to our Supreme Court. You get the picture; Nicodemus is highly-respected and influential.

In verse 2, we're told that Nicodemus comes to Jesus "by night." Perhaps he comes under the cover of darkness to avoid detection, or he comes at evening to have uninterrupted time with Jesus. There could be another reason why John chooses to highlight his nocturnal visit. Light and darkness run like a thread through John's gospel. Jesus repeatedly brings people out of darkness into the light. You are about to see how much Nicodemus is in the dark about Jesus' identity and mission.



Nicodemus begins by addressing Jesus in respectable fashion, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs apart from the presence of God"

(3:2). It's curious that Nicodemus uses the plural form "we know." This may well signal that he represents people other than himself.

Jesus announces, "Truly, truly, I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again" (3:3). So much for

having a nice, friendly chat. Jesus challenges Nicodemus' relationship with God right from the get-go.

Jesus introduces this teaching with the words “truly, truly.” This is a common way for Jesus to introduce important teaching. It occurs 25 times in John's gospel alone. The repetition of the word truly adds extra emphasis to what Jesus is about to say.

Born again can also be interpreted as “born from above.” In verse 4, it's obvious by Nicodemus' reply that he's thinking of an OBGYN birth rather than B-I-B-L-E birth. “How can anyone be born again after they are old?” he asks. “Can we enter a second time into the mother's womb to be born?” (3:4).

Jesus continues to drive home his point, “Truly, truly, I tell you no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (3:5). Water and Spirit are used interchangeably in this verse to underscore the spiritual nature of this new birth.

Jesus continues, “Whatever is born of flesh is flesh and whatever is born of Spirit is Spirit. Do not be astonished that I say to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 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” (3:6-8).

Nicodemus, for all his religious training, hardly knows what to say next. All he can think to ask is the question, “How can these things be?” (3:9).

Jesus answers Nicodemus' question with a question of his own, “Are you a teacher in Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (3:9). Do you catch the



Hendricksz, 1645

Are you a leader in Israel and yet do not understand these things? 3.9

irony? John identified Nicodemus from the outset as a respected teacher. Jesus calls him a teacher here, yet also calls him out for being ignorant of how to begin a relationship with God.

Jesus launches into an extended discourse about his role in making this new birth possible. He brings Nicodemus to the heart of the gospel in verse 16. My 7-year-old grandson, Luke, has committed this verse to memory. Martin Luther called this verse the gospel in summary, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.”

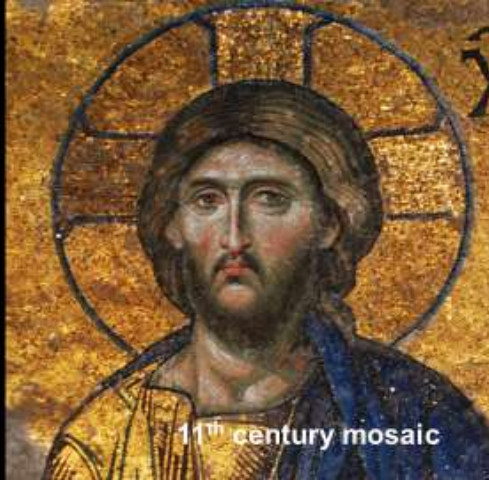
This is the last we hear of Nicodemus in this story. We’re not told what happens next. Maybe he needs time to sort it out. Something must have happened! Nicodemus resurfaces in two other places in John’s gospel. In the first story, the temple police are queried by the Pharisees as to why they haven’t yet arrested Jesus. Only one man, Nicodemus, is willing to insist that Jesus receive a fair trial (7:50). In the second reference, two men appear before the Roman authorities to ask for Jesus’ body after his crucifixion to give his body a decent burial. One of them is Nicodemus (19:39). I suspect he comes this time, not as a seeker, but as a committed follower of Jesus.

We come to the “so-what” moment. So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? Four observations come to mind about spiritual birth.

1. Spiritual birth is a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of God. It’s not treated as something optional. Jesus said we won’t enter God’s kingdom without it.

I have a linguistic bone to pick with the phrase *born-again Christian*. It is redundant. Every Christian is, by definition born again. A *born-again Christian* is the equivalent of saying someone is a Christian-Christian; it’s a kind of theological stuttering. It’s like saying that I drive a gray, gray car.

Truly, truly,
I tell you, no
one can enter
the kingdom of
God without
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water and
Spirit. 3.5



Do not miss Jesus' point: we must be born again. In the early verses of chapter 3, the pronouns are all singular and addressed to Nicodemus alone. Yet by verse 5, the pronouns shift to plural tense and are addressed to

John's readers also: "Truly, truly, I tell *you*, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

2. Spiritual birth is something God does in us. New birth is not something we do by our own strength and power. Birth is not something we can control, whether physical or spiritual. Spiritual birth is something only God can effect. Peter writes in his first epistle, "By His great mercy He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3).

3. Spiritual birth defies stereotyping. There is no model formula for what happens at spiritual birth. Some of you say I must not be born again because I haven't had the experience. But what's the experience? There is no uniform experience of new birth in Scripture. There is no single emotion to mark the event. Spiritual birth happens any number of ways, whether dramatic or subtle.

4. Spiritual birth requires a willingness on our part to receive this new birth. On our side, it all comes down to a matter of the will. Are we willing to turn our lives over to God's care and mercy? Are we willing to be born from above?

Albert Camus was an acclaimed French novelist, playwright, journalist and philosopher in the 20th century. He was also a committed atheist. One Sunday, he visited the American Church in Paris to hear the organ. He struck up a conversation with its pastor, Howard Mumma. He became intrigued with his sermons,

so he kept coming. One day, he told Howard, “The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I’m almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void I am experiencing.



I am searching for something the world is not giving me.”

Camus said he felt most drawn to Nicodemus in the Bible. He asked Howard, “What does it mean to be born again, to be saved?”

Mumma replied, “To me to be born again is to enter into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. You are ready to move ahead, to commit yourself to new life, to begin a spiritual pilgrimage.”

Camus looked at him with tears in his eyes, “Howard, I am ready. I want this. This is what I want to commit my life to.” Shortly after their conversation, Camus died in a car accident. We don’t know whether Camus opened his life to Christ before he died.

Maybe, like Camus, you are ready to open yourself to this new birth. You are ready to begin this spiritual journey. Others of you have already done so. You have turned your heart and will over to God. Yet there is danger in regarding spiritual birth as a stand-alone event rather than a continuous process. Spiritual birth is not the end; it is a means to an end. Our mission as a church is “Becoming Like Christ Together for the World.” We want to discover the difference Jesus can make in our lives.



Spiritual birth is intended to lead to spiritual growth. We all begin the Christian life the same way: we're born into it. Yet God does not intend for us to remain spiritual newborns. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians

about all the challenges associated with remaining infants forever (3:1-3). The initial conversion to Christ (big C) is followed by a series of smaller conversions to Christ (small c).

Many of you have had extended time with family over Christmas. You became newly aware of old hurts and resentments in your family. There are people in your family and mine we find it difficult to like. Some family members annoy us and get under our skin. How can you leverage Christ's presence and power to improve family relationships? You can apply this same process to any area of your life you have walled off from Christ. Faith is a continual process of turning our lives over to Christ

An 18th century proverb comes to mind, "If the shoe fits, wear it." Wherever this sermon applies to you, do something about it. If you are at the beginning, open your life to the new birth Christ offers you. If you need to reengage in the process of spiritual growth in this New Year, then get after it. Wherever the shoe fits, wear it.