



THE SPIRIT OF NEW LIFE

John 3:1-16
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This is the first in a series of sermon on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. This sermon is about the pioneering work of the Spirit in our lives, opening our hearts to faith in Jesus and our eyes to see the Kingdom of God.

As a young man growing up in Alabama, Tom had read some of the Bible, he had attended church, and he had even made a profession of Christian faith. But Jesus wasn't Lord of his life. Hate was. Tom was consumed by hatred, especially for blacks and Jews. In the 1960s he joined the Ku Klux Klan and took up their cause with singular determination. He used to drive through black neighborhoods and shoot into homes, in hopes of sparking a war along racial lines. "I thought I was a Christian fighting against the Communist-Jewish conspiracy," he says. "I was doing it for God and country."

In 1967, the Klan sent Tom to Meridian, Mississippi, to bomb the home of a rabbi. What Tom didn't know was that an informant had alerted the police. Ten FBI agents, and a dozen sheriff's deputies were waiting there to ambush him. Tom dropped his homemade bomb of 29 sticks of dynamite at the house, but it didn't explode. Instead, the agents opened fire. Tom's pregnant accomplice was killed, and he was severely wounded. Miraculously, the doctors patched him back together, and in 1968 Tom was sentenced to 30 years in Parchman State Prison.

In his jail cell, Tom's heart churned with hatred as he read Nietzsche and more Klan propaganda. When the opportunity came, he broke out of jail with two other men, one of whom was shot to death in the chase. Tom, however, survived unharmed, and returned to Parchman for solitary confinement. In the isolation of his 6x9 cell, Tom picked up the Bible once again. But this time as he read it, everything was different. When he came to Matthew 16:26, he heard Jesus speaking directly to him, saying: "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his own soul?" For the first time in his life, Tom saw Jesus with the eyes of true faith. There in his cell, he gave his life to Christ. Tom says, "I fell on my knees and prayed and felt a thousand-pound weight lifted from me."

From that point on, Tom's life was transformed. Eight years later, he was released from prison, and he quickly became an influential spokesman for peace and racial reconciliation. Now some 45 years later, there's no question that Tom was completely transformed that day. But how did it happen? Did he do it himself? Did he simply choose peace instead of violence, unity instead of hate? Or was it an act of God?

BELIEVING IS SEEING. John 2:23-25.

We've all heard the expression, "seeing is believing," i.e. show me first, then I'll believe. But Christianity teaches the opposite. Christianity teaches that "believing is seeing."

The story of Doubting Thomas highlights this principle. On Easter (John 20:24), the Apostle Thomas missed out on seeing the resurrected Jesus. When the others told him that they had seen the risen Lord, Thomas doubted them, saying, "unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." In other words, "seeing is believing."

On the following Sunday (20:26), Jesus returned and invited Thomas to see and touch his wounds, after which Thomas believed. Then Jesus said, "Blessed are those who *have not yet seen and yet have believed.*" In other words, Jesus put faith the other way round: instead of "seeing is believing," blessed are those who believe first and then see.

John closed out the story with an epilogue (20:30): Jesus did many other miraculous signs not recorded in this Gospel, but what is recorded is so that "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." This was John's goal in writing—that we might encounter Jesus in the Scriptures, and in so doing we might first believe, and then see the Kingdom of God.

Back in John 2:23 (the introduction to the Nicodemus story), we learn that many who saw Jesus' miraculous signs *believed*, but that Jesus didn't *entrust* himself to them. (The words translated *believed* and *entrust* here are the same word in the Greek New Testament.) Why didn't Jesus entrust himself to these so-called believers? Why wouldn't Jesus be overjoyed that people were believing in him? Because their belief was superficial and fleeting, and it's not the kind of belief Jesus requires.

It's as if John was saying that there's faith, and then there's faith. There's the "seeing is believing" faith of those who saw Jesus' miraculous signs and were superficially attracted to him, jumping on the bandwagon as it were. The recent explosion of enthusiasm for US goalie Tim Howard is a "seeing is believing" kind of faith. We saw his miraculous signs in the World Cup, we saw his handsome Persian beard, and, well, we just *believe* in him. At least until we forget all about soccer again for another four years. That's the faith of the bandwagon, the "seeing is believing" faith, and quite frankly it's the best faith we as human beings can muster apart from God.

But there's another kind of faith, the "believing is seeing" kind of faith, which can only come as a gift of God. As we'll learn in just a moment, it's what Jesus offers to Nicodemus, and to all of us.

WE CAN'T SEE. John 3:1-4.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a "believer," but only of the "seeing is believing" variety. He says (3:2), "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that

you do unless God is with him.” Why does Nicodemus believe? Because he has seen Jesus’ miracles, and, well, seeing is believing. This “seeing is believing” faith is the best faith that Nicodemus can muster apart from God. This is not to say that God isn’t at work in Nicodemus’ life. He clearly is, in bringing Nicodemus to meet Jesus. But Nicodemus comes in the middle of the night, which is emblematic of his spiritual blindness. Nicodemus is groping in the dark because he cannot see. If he could, he would fall on his knees before Jesus and worship him. Instead, he calls Jesus “rabbi,” and a “teacher come from God.” In other words, Nicodemus “sees” Jesus not as Lord, but as his *peer*. Want to stay the same for the rest of your life? “Believe” in Jesus like this, “see” Jesus not as God but as an insightful, gifted, spiritual person—just like yourself. Bring him down to your level in order to see him, and you’ll never see him at all.

To be clear, Nicodemus probably isn’t aware of his blindness. In 3:1 John says that he’s a Pharisee, and while that may have negative connotations to us today, it didn’t back in Palestine in those days. Rather, it meant that Nicodemus was an upstanding member of the community—clean-cut, and patriotic in the best sense. John also describes him as a “Ruler of the Jews” in v1, i.e. a member of the Sanhedrin, which would perhaps be a rough equivalent to a US Senator. And in v10 Jesus calls him “the teacher of Israel,” i.e. a prominent teacher and spiritual leader for the whole nation. So it turns out that Nicodemus is a VIP. He’s a Jewish success story, one of the brightest lights in the nation, probably a repeated winner of the Rabbi of the Year award.

Here’s the point: not only is Nicodemus a religious and political leader, but he’s also the embodiment of a self-made man. He’s risen to the top of society by working hard and making the right choices. Since he was a kid he’s kept all the major feasts. He was probably bar mitzvahed at thirteen. He undoubtedly memorized the Bible to become a rabbi. He shook a lot of hands and kissed a lot of babies in order to become a ruler and teacher. And now he is The Honorable Nicodemus, celebrated and loved by the people, giving to the best causes, helping out at the homeless shelter, visiting the troops. Everyone wants to hear his views on the Roman occupation, on the fine points of Judaism, and especially on the Kingdom of God. If there’s anyone who sees clearly, it’s him. And there in the darkness, he “sees” Jesus and says, “Young man, I really admire all you’ve been doing with the miraculous signs. Well done!”

But Jesus doesn’t play. (3:3) Jesus replies, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” In other words, “Nicodemus, you think you can see God’s Kingdom, but in fact you are blind. If you truly wish to see, you must be born again.” Unfortunately, “born again” conjures for us notions of some of the worst of TV religion. But long, long before the clowns and hucksters were selling religion over the airwaves, Jesus sincerely invited us to be born again. We need to think about what Jesus meant by this, apart from these unfortunate modern connotations.

Here’s what I understand Jesus to be saying when he speaks of being “born again:” *internal renewal caused by an external power*. Let’s look at these closely connected components in turn.

First, being born again describes an *internal renewal*. And by renewal I mean transformation, because being born again involves a completely new beginning. This is no upgrade to your existing operating system. It’s not an app or a plug-in. Rather, it’s a complete rebuild and reboot according to new specifications, or more specifically, under new management. Like Tom entering

Parchman as a Klansman filled with hate, and emerging eight years later as a spokesman for Jesus and an advocate for racial reconciliation. Being born again means no less than the end of self-rule, and the inauguration of God's kingship in your life. That's why Jesus says that you can't see the Kingdom of God unless you're born again. And though it would be incredibly hard, imagine how wonderful and freeing it would be to make a brand new start with God as your king!

Second, when Jesus speaks of being born again he's talking about the agency of an *external power*. Do you remember when you were born, when you realized that mama was in a lot of pain straining and pushing, and then you chose to lend a hand and help her out a bit? Of course not, because when you're born, you're completely helpless and out of control. This point is hammered home in vv 3-10, in which human inability is mentioned five times. We can't. We can't. We can't. We can't. We can't.

Thus, the good news of being "born again" is that it means a complete internal overhaul, getting rid of all the bad and replacing it with good. It made my friend Tom one of the kindest and gentlest people I've ever met. Who wouldn't want that? But the bad news is this: it's something we can't do ourselves. Being born again requires an Act of God. Tom couldn't do it himself. Neither can I. Nor can you.

Our culture passionately believes in self-control, self-help, and self-determination. We are surrounded by messages assuring us that we can effect our own transformation. And sure, we can diet and exercise and get into better shape. We can take lessons and practice and become proficient on a musical instrument or a foreign language. But what about inner transformation? Heart change? What about moving from anxiety to peace, from hatred to love, from selfishness to generosity? Jesus says, No, you must be born again, and this requires an Act of God. For the Honorable Nicodemus, a self-made man just like you and me, this is dumbfounding: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4)

He's completely bewildered, asking Jesus, "Must *I climb back in* in order to come out again?" No, Nicodemus, but there is another way.

THE HOLY SPIRIT OPENS OUR EYES. 3:5-8.

Jesus says that when it comes to internal renewal, you can't do it yourself. You must be born again, and the external power for rebirth is the Holy Spirit. In John 3:5 Jesus says, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." By water, it's hard to tell whether Jesus was talking about our first birth as human beings, e.g. when mama's "water" broke, or whether he's talking about our rebirth as Christians, when our sins are washed away and our hearts are made perfectly clean. Either way, the thrust of what Jesus is saying here remains the same: you must be born again, and the external power for rebirth is the Holy Spirit.

The Bible teaches that there are many, many ways that the Holy Spirit is active in the world and in the lives of Christians. The Spirit helps us pray, the Spirit gives us love for one another, the Spirit helps us in our weakness against sin, etc. But regeneration, or new birth, is the Spirit's

starting point. What Jesus teaches Nicodemus here is Holy Spirit 101, an introduction to Pneumatology. From our perspective, this is where the ministry of the Holy Spirit begins, because if our eyes are going to be opened to all of God's Kingdom, we must first be born again, through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus offers two illustrations in order to explain the ministry of the Spirit to Nicodemus. First, in 3:6, he says that *like begets like*. As human beings, without God's help, we are blind to the Kingdom of God. And our regenerative power is limited: blind humans can only give birth to more blind humans. All of creation works this way. Just as dogs can't choose to give birth to cats, we can't choose to give birth to humans with spiritual sight. Only the Holy Spirit can do that.

Second, Jesus likens the Spirit to the wind. And for this, you need to know that both the Greek word *Pneuma*, and the Hebrew word *Ruach*, can be translated as either wind, breath, or spirit. So when Jesus compares the Holy Spirit to the wind, he's making a play on words, and saying that the wind is invisible, and its source is unknown, so it's mysterious, yet very real. Think of the very real power of a hurricane. It's invisible, we don't know where it comes from, and yet it's incredibly powerful. And if the earthly pneuma is this way, why not the Holy Pneuma, the Holy Spirit? It blows where it pleases. You can't control it, and so it goes with everyone who is born again.

And note that with both of Jesus' illustrations, the Holy Spirit remains in the background, away from the spotlight. In both 3:6, where the Spirit is like a parent begetting a child, and in 3:8, where the Spirit is like the wind, our attention is directed toward the Spirit's work, while the Spirit keeps out of sight. This is why the Holy Spirit remains somewhat mysterious, even for Christians. The Spirit prefers to direct our attention elsewhere. In fact, the primary work of the Spirit is in helping us look to Jesus.

LOOK TO JESUS. 3:9-16.

As we've learned, we're all spiritually blind apart from the Holy Spirit. And what's even more frustrating is that we can't control the Holy Spirit. Most of us are hard-wired to believe that we can determine our own destiny. In fact, many of us have been taught that we are in control of our own spirituality. But Jesus teaches us otherwise. It is the Holy Spirit—and not us—who is in control.

This leaves Nicodemus utterly dumbfounded. His last words in this story are found in 3:9 where he says, "How is this possible?" And I suspect that we all can relate to his confusion. "If it's not up to me, what am I to do?" This is how we always feel when we lose control in the dark. "Aaaaagh. I'm out of control. What's happening? I'm falling. Help!"

Not surprisingly, this is also how it feels to be born. "I'm out of control. What's happening? I'm falling! Help!" When we hand over control of our lives to Jesus, it feels the same. It's scary, but it's necessary, because we can't see, and we can't save ourselves. Only he can. And when the Spirit begins a new work in us, the first thing he enables us to see is Jesus on the cross. That's the first glimpse of daylight when we're born again.

Jesus doesn't explain this in detail to Nicodemus, because the cross is yet to come in John's Gospel story. Instead, Jesus uses an Old Testament story to picture what will happen to him. In John 3:14-16 he says, "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. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

In the Old Testament story (Numbers 21:4-9), serpents were savagely attacking the Israelites. So God told Moses to make a bronze image of the serpent and lift it up. Then as the people looked to the bronze image of that which was hurting them, they were saved. This is not as odd as it first sounds. In fact, it was part of the regular worship practices of the Israelites. They would take a lamb, lay their hands on it as a way of identifying it with themselves, and symbolically transferring their own sins to it. Then they would kill the lamb and present it to God, to symbolize the costliness of their own sin. They would look to this dying lamb as a substitute for themselves, the death of the sacrificial lamb instead of the death of the sinner. They were doing something quite similar with the bronze serpent. As one of the Puritan commentators put it, "That which cured was shaped in the likeness of that which wounded."

So also God sent his only Son, Jesus, to put on human flesh and live as one of us. He took on our likeness, and then in his death he took on our sin. He was made sin on our behalf (2 Cor 5:21), and was lifted up as a sacrifice in our stead. He suffered God's judgment against our sin in his body. We can't save ourselves, but whoever looks to him will not perish but have eternal life.

So which is it? Are we blind, or not? If we're truly blind, how can we see Jesus? Again, it's the first work of the Holy Spirit, enabling us to see Jesus. In 3:13 Jesus says, No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from it. We can't see God's kingdom because we haven't been there. But Jesus has. He's our emissary. Our interpreter and guide. And because the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see him, through him we are able to see the Kingdom of God.

Make no mistake, what Jesus is saying here is that he is the only one. No other religion will open our eyes. No other path will lead to the top of the mountain. So there's exclusivity here. Jesus is the only way. But this is an exclusivity unlike any other, because it is meant to exclude no one. It has a universal reach. Again, what's driving this story is what he says in 3:16, "For God so *loved* the world..." Because of God's love, the way of the cross is open to every tribe and tongue, people and nation. The Spirit blows where it wills, but anyone, anywhere who looks to Jesus will see him and will be born again.

If you have never experienced this internal transformation that comes by the power of God's Spirit, but you want to do so, then let me assure you of God's love for you. Look to Jesus, lifted up on the cross. See him there as your substitute and savior. Pledge your allegiance to him. The Holy Spirit will take control of your life, and you will experience spiritual transformation. As the Spirit gave new life to my friend Tom, the Spirit will give new life to you too.

Incidentally, in case you're wondering whatever happened to The Honorable Nicodemus, he fades into the darkness in 3:9, but he reemerges two more times (7:50, 19:39) in the Gospel of

John. Though we can't be absolutely certain, from what we can tell by the end of the story, the Holy Spirit has done a new work in him too.

Finally, as we keep reading the story of redemption in Acts and the rest of the New Testament, we see the Holy Spirit at work again and again in bringing people to faith. People like the Apostle Paul, who was busy arresting and murdering Christians when the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to see Jesus as Lord. I find this so encouraging; watch for it as you read the Scriptures. Because what this means is that because the Spirit is in control, then the "toughest cases" so to speak are no match for God. If it depended on you and me, no one would ever be born again. But with God's Holy Spirit at work, there's hope that anyone and everyone—even people like my friend Tom—can be saved. This frees us up to point people to the Lord, to cry out to God for the salvation of our friends and family, and to trust the Spirit of New Life to work powerfully in their lives.