

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 3:1-21

*"A Confused Pharisee"*

"A man of the Pharisees, a member of the ruling Sanhedrin" came to see Jesus "by night." So begins one of the most famous chapters in John's Gospel. The encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus gives us two of the most famous statements in the NT: "You must be born again," and "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." One has been called the best one-line summary of the gospel, and has perhaps brought more people to faith than any other. But Jesus' statement about "new birth" caused Nicodemus great confusion, and continues to confuse many people today. We need to understand it better.

### 1) *A Pharisee*

John's narrative emphasizes at the start that Nicodemus was a *Pharisee*. Who were they, and why does it matter that he was one? The question plunges us into the confused, tumultuous state of 1<sup>st</sup> C. Judaism. The origin of the Pharisees goes back to 150BC or more, probably to the Maccabean period, where a group of *hasidim* - holy ones - began a long effort to purify the nation of Israel after the unsatisfactory "return" from the Babylonian Exile. The Temple had been partially rebuilt, but the Davidic monarchy had never been restored. More was needed!

After Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East and spread Greek language and culture everywhere, Israel became just one more province of someone else's empire; Greek then Syrian and Egyptian and finally Roman in 63 BC. The Maccabee family had become famous for purifying the Temple in 164BC from its desecration by the Syrian king, now remembered yearly in the new feast of Hannukah. But everyone knew that the kingdom of Israel had not been fully restored, and that the Roman puppet Herod was no "King of the Jews." The question was intensely debated, even fought over: what did it mean to be a good Jew in this period? Some groups - the Sadducees, the priestly class - accommodated themselves to the new arrangement and even prospered under it.

Others saw friendship with Rome as treason, and grew increasingly violent. Some, like the Essenes, withdrew into separate communities. The Pharisees were also "separatists" in attitude, but they expressed it by attempting to "purify" themselves and the nation. They were strict in their observance of Torah and many other traditions they had devised. They tried to make the ritual purifications of the priests apply to ordinary people as well. They were not, as has been pointed out by many NT

scholars in recent years, trying to create a “ladder of righteous performances” to make themselves acceptable to God – some kind of “works righteousness” - but they were intent on “marking the boundaries” of the true people of God.

So Pharisees were deeply concerned with the things that made Jews Jews – Sabbath observance, the food laws, tithing, fasting, keeping away from “notorious sinners;” and they advocated the purity of the Temple, the detailed study and practice of Torah, and concern for the land of Israel. They cared not just about personal purity and piety, but about “reforming the nation.” They were pious, but they were also nationalists. They were preparing the nation for the day when God’s Messiah would restore the Temple and the monarchy, perhaps by violent means.

## 2) *You Must Be Born Again*

Nicodemus is a little condescending to Jesus (“We Pharisees think quite well of you,” his opening remarks suggest). But Jesus confronts Nicodemus and his Pharisee agenda head on. He says, in effect, “you are missing the whole point of what God is doing.” You and your friends will have to abandon your agenda or it will end in ruin. You will have to start over with God, and accept that his kingdom will not arrive and will not be as you imagine. To enter it, you will have to become childlike, humble, accepting. For you, it will be like being born all over again, born by God’s Spirit, “born from above.”

Jesus takes up the imagery of the prophet Ezekiel during the Babylonian Exile, which refers to the “breath of God,” the “wind of God,” the “Spirit of God” putting new life into the dead dry bones of Israel. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean... I will put my Spirit in you,” the

LORD had said (Ezek 36:25-27). In Ezekiel’s vision of “the valley of dry bones,” the “four winds” bring the “breath of God” into Israel to make her alive again. “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live” (Ezek 37:9-14).

There is, as I am sure you know, a provocative ambiguity (in both Hebrew and Greek) that uses one word for either *wind*, *breath* or *Spirit*. So when Jesus tells Nicodemus he needs new life, he says it can only come from the Spirit, which “like the wind” you cannot see or control. The giving of new life is an act of God. You may see its effects, but you cannot command it, you cannot organize it, you cannot earn it. Like the wind that seemingly blows where it pleases, the Spirit of God sovereignly gives new life.

Nicodemus is, of course, confused. His responses are ambiguous. “How can this be?” “Can a man re-enter his mother’s womb...?” Is he taking literally what Jesus clearly means metaphorically? Is he talking about physical birth when Jesus is talking about spiritual birth? Is he being willfully obtuse? Or does he understand all too well what Jesus means, and is only being wistful: “Can an old man really start over?”

But Jesus will not let him off the hook with confusion or sophistry - fallacious argument. “You all” - the *you* is plural; *all you* Pharisees - “must be born of water and the Spirit” - you cannot enter spiritual life and the kingdom of God without the work of the Spirit within you! “Flesh gives birth to flesh!” “You are a *teacher* of Israel and you don’t understand this?” “You people do not accept my testimony; you do not believe when I speak...” Jesus’ warning is stark. If they persist in rejecting him and pursuing their own agenda for national purity, if they persist in supporting every revolutionary “zealot” and “messianic” pretender, they will run into personal and national disaster.

### 3) *The Way Of The Cross*

If they will not embrace his way, the way of apparent weakness, they will perish. Jesus' way is different; his kingdom is not like their dream. Jesus will himself, like the bronze snake that Moses held up on a stick in the desert – where the LORD commanded that whoever looked at it in faith would be healed of his snake bites – Jesus himself will be “lifted up” and anyone who looks at him in faith will be healed of all their guilt and sin. They will be given the gift of life by the Spirit of God – they will share in Jesus' life, eternal life.

The way into life, and into the kingdom of God, will be through the death of Jesus. As confusing as that was to Nicodemus, it was the truth: God had sent his only Son into the world to save it from itself; he had sent his Son to restore the monarchy; he had sent his Son to be the new Temple. Anyone who believed this would be delivered from eternal death and given eternal life. But to accept that will require Nicodemus and all like him to give up on their own agenda for national goodness and greatness, and to embrace the death of the Son of God as the means by which the Father will win the great victory over evil – and over the personification of it in the Roman oppressors of God's people.

The “way of the cross” is the way into the kingdom, and embracing it is a humbling process, like “entering the kingdom as a little child.” The way of weakness, the way of humility, the way of simplicity, the way of acceptance, the way of death – is the way to eternal life. No wonder there were and are those who were confused, and those who “prefer the darkness.”

### 4) *Disciples*

What kind of disciple emerges on “the way of the cross”? In Nicodemus' case, we know only that later he spoke up for Jesus against other Pharisees who were condemning him (Jn 7:50), and finally broke out of the darkness into the light at the cross, when he went with Joseph of Arimathea to take down Jesus' body and anoint it for burial (Jn 19:38).

What of us as disciples? What can we learn from Nicodemus? That it is all too easy, in the great debate over what it means to part of God's people, to fall into the trap of making up our own agenda. That to pursue the “old and good ways” may leave us blind to the new thing that God is doing in our day. That to be deeply concerned with “purifying the nation” may distract us from Jesus and the life he offers. That to be sure we are right in our ways is to invite his rebuke.

From Jesus we learn that we cannot program the work of the Spirit. Like the wind, the Spirit is beyond our control or comprehension. It is ironic that we have tried to make being “born again” into a formula that anyone can repeat, and that everyone must do in a prescribed way. God redeems all people through the death and resurrection of Christ, that is sure. There is only one gospel. But God calls people to him in a variety of ways, at different stages of their lives, and with different degrees of drama. Some have what I would call the privilege of being able to remember a specific place and time when the gospel of Christ crucified first reached them; they can forever after look back and say “I know whom I believed” and when, and in times of doubt or sin or loss, that memory is precious and refreshing. They know when and where they were “born again”.

Other people are brought up to know about Jesus, to realize that he loves them, and come to love him too; as years go by, they slowly – as the reality of sin enters their consciences – come to realize that Jesus died to redeem even them too from sin’s power and its consequences. As life brings up new challenges to faith, they learn to trust him more. As they reflect on their experience of discipleship, they see that indeed God’s own Spirit has led them to faith and is keeping them in faith.

“You *must* be born from above” is Jesus’ command, and it is true. How it comes about is as invisible as the blowing of the wind. You can see its effects in people’s lives; you cannot program it. What matters is that it happens, suddenly or slowly. What matters is that you are today a child of God, born of his Spirit.

But once that has happened, let us remember the other lesson of Nicodemus: that we are not called to spend the rest of our lives setting up “boundary markers” for the people of God. This is not to say that in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. the Sabbath, the food laws, the Temple, the Torah were unimportant. But none were as important as what God was doing in Jesus, and how his Spirit was making a new “people of God” whose boundaries would now be far beyond Israel’s.

Israel’s calling was to be “a light to the Gentiles,” and it would now be fulfilled in ways they had never dreamed of, and despite their efforts to define it in nationalistic terms. Our calling, to “let our light – the light of Christ – shine” into the world, will also not be achieved by nationalism or calls to purify any nation’s life. Too many Christians are still setting out “boundary markers,” on the right and the left, to define the *true* people of God. It’s not that none of these are important issues; some of them are. But they are not the gospel.

Too many people today know only too well what Christians are *against*, and very little of what they are *for*. We are for grace and goodness and love and truth and forgiveness and faith; we are for the gospel of redemption that is offered to all people. The gospel is the gracious act of the God who loves “the world” – which means all kinds of people in all kinds of places – loves them enough to give his only Son so that *anyone* who believes in him will be saved from perishing and have eternal life!  
Let us pray...