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A: Lent 2
John 3:1-17

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Salem, Bridgeport

“You Must Be Born Again!”

When did you take a leap of faith?

Not specifically in terms of your faith but just in general?

I remember that at the last ELCA Youth Gathering that I went to with Salem’s youth,
we spent 1 of the 3 days engaged in educational and recreational activities.

And the major attraction in the recreational area was this thing

where you were strapped onto some sort of line, and you climbed up this ladder that was like 50’-60’ high
& then you had to jump off & trust that the line would hold & you’d swing back & forth like a pendulum
until your group grabbed onto ropes attached to you to slowly bring you to a stop.

The climbing up was a little scary and the swinging part was a little scary,
but the stepping off into space was utterly terrifying.

It was one of those activities that are often incorporated into ropes courses
to illustrate in a very experiential way what it means to take a leap of faith.

It takes a lot of courage because you know that as soon as you step off that platform,
you have zero control of what happens next.

Which must have been how Nicodemus felt. Imagine that you are he.

You’re not just a Jew, but a Pharisee,

someone who didn’t just follow the basic moral demands of scripture but who spent every day
immersed in fulfilling every rule and regulation, observing every rite and ritual,
attempting to live the righteous life God’s people were called to live.

And not only were you a Pharisee but you were a teacher of the Pharisees.

You had spent your whole life living in a way that gave you an identity and a purpose and a plan.

And now, towards the end of your life, comes this young rabbi

who is saying that everything you had been taught was wrong,
that none of what you had dedicated your life to even mattered, basically, that it was all a waste.

That sure sounded like blasphemy

and this Jesus should be written off and either ignored or driven out of town.

BUT here was the problem: he was not just teaching and preaching outlandish things;

he was also healing and performing all kinds of signs and wonders and miracles
that could only be done through the power of God.

This was cognitive dissonance at the max!

If the rabbi’s teachings were wrong, he shouldn’t have been able to perform signs;

but if he was performing signs then his teaching must be right, which couldn’t be.

It just didn’t track.

This rabbi was calling into question everything that Nicodemus believed
about God and himself and the Jewish faith.

It made him question who he was and who God was and what God wanted of him;

it called into question the meaning and the purpose of his life.

He would have to decide if this Jesus was sent from God or not.

And if he was, then Nicodemus would have to jump off the edifice of his belief systems
into something he didn’t understand in the least.

His whole life could change and he could lose everything.

It's no wonder Nicodemus was confused.

Reading John can be confusing for anyone. So let me try to make some sense of it for you. There are 4 phrases, in particular, that are crucial to the understanding of this text.

The first is this: *"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."*

Last week we touched a little on this when we talked about how after his baptism,

Jesus didn't immediately get down to business in the material world;
instead, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness

to fast and pray and listen and discern what it was that GOD wanted him to do.
It wasn't what he thought he should do, or what anyone else thought he should do,
but about what GOD wanted him to do.

In other words, Jesus, having been baptized by the Spirit,
was concerned first and foremost about the spiritual world,
or as he called it, "the kingdom of heaven" or "the dominion of God",

I also talked about this in the cover article in this month's newsletter,
when I reminded us that we are not just physical beings, but spiritual ones.

So since I've already talked about the spiritual realm twice this week,
we'll move on to this crucial phrase:

"You must be born again, born from above, born of the Spirit."

Remember when I said that we are all spiritual as well as physical beings?

Well, while we are spiritual beings, we can live our entire lives
without ever being aware of our spiritual nature, without ever paying attention to it,
without ever nourishing it, without ever learning how to utilize its power.

So, what Jesus is saying here is that something has to happen to activate our spiritual life.
What has to happen is that we must be born again.

Now if you're like me, you were taught that we are born again at our baptism,
but that is NOT what the Bible teaches.

(If you're feeling anxious or resistant at this point,
know that you are feeling EXACTLY the way Nicodemus felt! But stick with me...)

Every single person in the New Testament who is described as receiving the Spirit
is an adult; not once does the Bible ever record a child or infant receiving the Spirit.

If you want to believe they did, go right ahead and believe,
but the Bible does NOT support that belief.

Jesus says that we, as adults, must be born again.

That's probably hard for some of you to hear; it certainly used to be hard for me to hear.

Because all of my life I was taught that there were 2 groups that called themselves Christian:
those who said you had to be born again as a youth or an adult,
and those who said you could be born again as an infant,
and WE were the 2nd kind, the kind who had it right while those others had it wrong.

(Again, if you are experiencing anxiety or resistance, it's because of cognitive dissonance,
being told something that is at odds with what you have here-to-fore believed.

And again, that puts you in the exact same place as Nicodemus.)

But stick with me... Because Jesus isn't the only one who says that.

How many of you have ever heard of Carl Jung?

He was a famous Swiss psychiatrist who had an alcoholic patient who just couldn't get sober. Jung finally told the guy that his only hope, his very last chance for recovery, was for him to undergo a spiritual conversion.

Jung said he needed a psychic change – a felt-experience of being born again.

Jung went on to say that this “born again” experience wasn't necessary just for alcoholics. He said it's absolutely necessary for every human being to be born again – not as an infant or a child, but in the second half of their life, and here is why....

Jung believed that our main task in the first half of our life is to build up, inflate our egos – so that we can become a separate person with our own separate identity, starting with separating from our mothers.

What gives us the courage to separate is feeling that we are special, and that, even though we are separate, we belong – to our families, our faith tradition, our race, our gender, our country, etc.

But then, Jung says, in the second half of life – often starting with some major crisis – we enter a new phase of ego reduction, a time of deflation,

If we don't enter this new phase, our egos will continue to inflate

and we'll want what we want when we want it and try to force others to conform to our will.

We'll be seen by others as narrow minded, self-centered, and arrogant, and perhaps as a bully.

So we need to be born again, which sets us free from our self-centeredness, and from our tribal mentality,

and allows us to take all the things that made us feel special, and one by one, let them go.

And as we let them go, this is how we each begin to see things:

I'm special, but I am no more special than you.

My family, my tribe, my race, my faith tradition, and my country are all special, but no more special than any other family, tribe, race, faith tradition, or country.

And here's the part that connects with why Jesus talked about being born again, because when I have been born again,

I am not the one at the center anymore; God is.

I'm not the one calling the shots or making the decisions anymore; God is.

The world no longer revolves around me, but around God.

And I now give, not from a place of power or privilege, but from a place of humility, since I know that not only have I been called to be a blessing to others,

I know that others have been called to be a blessing to me.

So we've talked about being born of the Spirit,

how we are both spiritual as well as physical beings

and we've talked about how that born again experience

is crucial to activating life in the Spirit.

But there are 2 other phrases in what Jesus says that deserve our attention.

Jesus says that *“the Son of Man must be lifted up”*.

So let me ask you, what does it mean for Jesus to be lifted up?

Because of the comparison with Moses lifting up a serpent,

we tend to confine the meaning to Jesus being lifted up on the cross at the crucifixion.

But it's important to note that in the gospel of John,

lifting up always means more than Jesus' Crucifixion.

It also refers to Jesus being lifted up from death to life in the Resurrection,

and from his physical life in this world to his spiritual life in heaven at the Ascension.

For John these three things – Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension –

are all part of the singular salvific action of God:

And the significance of that here is that it is exactly

because Jesus has been lifted up in the Ascension that we have been sent the Spirit.

I want you to hold on to that thought tightly for a minute so let me say it again.

It is because Jesus has been lifted up in the Ascension that we have been sent the Spirit.

Hold onto that thought while we look at the final crucial phrase in our text.

“The Son of Man must be lifted up SO THAT whoever trusts in him may have eternal life.”

And what is eternal life?

Because it has often been translated everlasting life, we tend to think of it as life after we die in heaven.

That's certainly a part of it, but only a part.

For John the more important part is the part that begins right here & right now in this life on this earth.

So it's life that begins now, but what kind of life?

John makes it more clear in 10:10b where Jesus says,

“I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly!”

So eternal life is abundant life, which helps fill out the picture some, but still leaves us with questions.

And then in 17:3, John defines it most clearly,

“And this is eternal life, that they may know...the only true God, and Jesus Christ”.

This is the point of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension:

This is why Jesus came – that all might KNOW God.

And the Greek word for “know” in this case is the strongest, most intimate, knowledge possible, the word that is also used for sexual relations.

It's what Jesus is talking in John 14:20 when he says, *“Because I live, you also will live.*

On that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you are in Me, and I am in you.”

The point, not only of Jesus' words in our gospel today, but of the entire Christian faith,

is that Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus and Jesus is in God.

And so our “knowing” is not an intellectual exercise, but an intimate relationship.

That intimate relationship does not come automatically at birth or at baptism,

but it comes through an experience that changes our lives from one thing into another.

the experience of being born again, being born from above, being born of the Spirit.

It's not something that we can make happen, because the Spirit blows where it will.

But when we ask in faith, and when we believe we will receive, then the Spirit will come.

It's not easy for old dogs to learn new tricks. It wasn't easy for Nicodemus and it's not easy for us.

But in the end, Nicodemus risks his life for Jesus, defending him before the Sanhedrin,

and bringing spices for his burial.

In the end, the wind, the breath, the ruach, the pneuma, the energy, the Spirit of the Living God

blows into Nicodemus.

May it blow into each and everyone of us. Amen

[parts re Carl Jung: <https://sermonwriter.com/sermons/new-testament-john-31-17-nick-at-night-wigmore/>]