

Born of the Spirit

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Study for Christ and Nicodemus on a Rooftop" by Henry Ossawa Tanner

Prayer of Illumination

God of signs and wonders,
we come to your word again and again,
seeking understanding
and the new life it offers.

By the power of your Holy Spirit,
illumine our hearts and minds
so that we may believe this testimony
and have eternal life.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
our Teacher and Savior, we pray.
Amen.

Background

We've been hearing in the news about our former President Jimmy Carter who is 98 years old and in hospice. When Carter announced that he was running for president of the United States in 1974 he introduced himself this way: "I am a farmer, an engineer, a businessman, a planner, a scientist, a governor, and a Christian."

He ended up winning the presidential election and served from 1977 to 1981. But he wasn't finished after leaving the office—*not by a longshot*.

Jimmy and his wife Rosalynn the next year founded the Carter Center that works around the globe for human rights and the alleviation of suffering. In 2002 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his peacemaking efforts. In his 90's he was teaching courses at Emory University, volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, and for forty plus years taught Sunday School at the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, where he made the wooden cross that hangs from the choir loft.

Through all these years, Carter unabashedly declared that he was a "born again Christian."



He was referring to our gospel reading this morning where Jesus says to the Pharisee Nicodemus, "you must be "born again" or "born from above."

Jesus uses another word play – that of "wind" and "spirit." The Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma* can both mean "wind" or "spirit." Jesus is using these cryptic word plays and double meanings to shake up Nicodemus' and our assumptions and categories.

We need one more piece of background information before listening to our gospel reading. Jesus makes an obscure reference to a bronze snake on a pole found in Numbers 21 in the Hebrew Scriptures. An interesting side note is that the snake on a stick is the most recognized sign of medicine and healing in the world—you'll see it on ambulances and hospitals. This medical symbol alludes to stories of the healing power of snakes in Greek mythology, but interestingly enough, the same theme also comes up in the Old Testament.

Israel was in the thick of their forty-year wilderness wandering. They complained to God about the lack of food and water and wanted to go back to slavery in Egypt. As punishment for their complaining, God sent venomous snakes among them. This got their attention and they confessed their sin to God.

The Lord told Moses to cast a bronze serpent that would be raised up on a pole in the camp. Anyone bitten by a snake could look upon the bronze serpent and they would be healed. In the same way, when Christ was raised up on the cross and eventually raised up to heaven, those who believe in him would be healed from their sin.

Let's hear now Rabbi Jesus' late night conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus. Nicodemus wanted to find his way out of the darkness—and so he searched for some light in the night.

Scripture: John 3:1-17 (NRSVue)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus ^[a] by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ^[b] ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You ^[c] must be born from above.' ^[d] ⁸ The wind ^[e] 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you ^[f] do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ^[g] ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ^[h]

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – “Born of the Spirit”



“You must be born again.”

In 2003, when Sarah, Abby (who was six months old at the time), and I moved to Egypt, we experienced a whole new life. It was almost like Abby wasn’t the only baby in our family. Sarah and I were babies too. We were starting all over again. We sold almost all our worldly belongings. We were utterly dependent upon our Egyptian friends. And they took good care of us. We didn’t know Arabic and had to begin language school. We were racially in the minority. We were in the religious minority with only 10% of the population being Christian. We were from a different country. Things you don’t think about were hard. Like, when Luke was born the next year, *how do you get a birth certificate?* It was a wonderful experience and a humbling one. This totally new immersive experience helped us see ourselves in a totally new way—impacting our perspectives politically, spiritually, and culturally. We would never be the same or see things the same.

“You must be born again.”

Jesus is telling us “how we come to God” and “How God comes to us.” And this is a miracle. A God thing. This isn’t about self-help or self-improvement. We can’t do this on our own.



I love the bulletin painting by Henry Ossawa Tanner. There’s an interesting part of the painting. If you look closely, behind Nicodemus and Jesus, you see the picture of a baby through an opening in a house. A parent is reaching for the infant. It’s a reminder that we need to be born again.

Martin Luther said centuries ago that this isn't about what you must do or not do, but what you must *become*. Calvin noted that rebirth isn't self-improvement, but rather a new beginning, a new life that God alone makes a reality. We can't create it ourselves. It's a miracle. God's miracle of creation and re-creation. Just as we didn't choose to be born, God mysteriously worked in us spiritual birth. We need two births: physical birth and spiritual birth. In our first birth, we become human beings. In our second birth, we become a new creation.

Nicodemus, at this point, just couldn't break out of the confines of merely human and earthly possibilities. He hadn't yet had that "aha moment" where he could see that with God, all things are possible. "You must be born of water and Spirit," says Jesus. What he seems to be saying is that water is the inward cleansing and quickening of the Spirit in our lives. *Do you really want to know and experience God in heaven?* Listen to Jesus on earth. "Listen to him," as God says. Only Jesus has seen God.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us—Jesus. And then Jesus returned to the Father. The Incarnation and the Ascension. Listen to him. Believe in him. Trust in him. Follow him. Spend time with him. He'll change your life, turning it upside down and inside out. The word "believe" or "trust" appears 147 times in the New Testament. Almost half of the occurrences can be found in either John's gospels or his three letters. Trust and believe are relationship words. Trust in him. Entrust your life to Jesus. Believe in him. Be-live in him. Trust in Jesus is an ongoing act: trusting is like breathing.

- Believing in God is something we do day and night—all the time.
- Breathing in God. Believing in God.

We entrust ourselves to a living breathing person, not a principle or a dogma. In John's gospel, the term "kingdom of God" is used only two times—both in this chapter. But there's another term that John uses that appears to mean the same thing as kingdom of God: "eternal life." They are interchangeable terms.

To see the kingdom of God, to enter into the kingdom of God, is to experience the real life, the abundant life, the everlasting life that Christ offers.

John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in all of the Bible. It's so much more than something you see between field goal posts and on sandwich boards. It's one of the most moving verses in all of Scripture. I love how one person broke down the words and phrases of this verse:

- **God:** the greatest *subject* ever.
- **So:** the greatest *extent* ever.
- **Loved:** the greatest *affection* ever.
- **The World:** the greatest *object* ever.
- **That he gave his only begotten Son:** the greatest *gift* ever.
- That **whosoever:** The greatest *opportunity* ever.
- **Believes** in him: The greatest *commitment* ever.
- Shall **not perish:** The greatest *rescue* ever.
- But have **everlasting life:** The greatest *promise* ever.

Like Nicodemus we need to be enlightened and regenerated. We need to be divinely opened to God's different and surprising ways of doing things. We need a divine delivery. Jesus is saying to us today: don't just grow old—you need to grow young. "Truly I say to you," says Jesus in Matthew's gospel, "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Get in touch with your inner child of God. It doesn't matter what year you were born, how many degrees you have, how many figures your salary is, what your title is, or what your bloodline is. Ask God for the gift of a beginner's mind. As Shunryu Suzuki said, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few." Humble yourself. Realize that you don't have it all figured out.

Being born of the Spirit is a gift. A face-lift of New Year's resolutions won't cut it. Reading the latest self-help book won't do the trick. No, we've got to allow God to do a total spiritual make-over of our lives. All you have to do is believe—to trust. Like the wind, you may not be able to grasp the mysteries of the Spirit or explain it, but you can experience it. Feel the effects of it. And deep down *you know that you know* that God is at work in you.

To believe isn't just to do theological head-nodding. To believe is to give your heart to, to hold dear, to love God, to live in God. To be-live.

Where are you now in the birthing process of spiritual life?

- *Not yet conceived?*
- *Developing, but not showing yet?*
- *Ready any day to be delivered?*
- *Overdue?*
- *Kicking and screaming?*
- *Growing like a weed?*

Wherever you are, look up to the crucified and risen Christ:

- He can exchange your impossibilities for possibility.
- He'll take your darkness and give you light.
- He'll receive your wounds and give you healing.
- He'll trade your old life and give you a new one.

Just believe. Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Study for Christ and Nicodemus on a Rooftop*," ca. 1923, oil on wood panel, Smithsonian American Art Museum

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