

There was a rabbi named Nicodemus who came to Jesus late in the night, struggling with who Jesus is. He comes in the darkness to the One who is the Light, seeking light. He doesn't really know what to ask Jesus. His head is full of questions. He breaks the ice by saying a few flattering things to Jesus. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God. For no one can do these signs which you are doing, if God were not with him."

Who is Jesus? Nicodemus wrestled with this question. He saw Jesus as someone who came from God but is not God Himself. He had heard stories and perhaps even seen some of the miracles - about water turned to wine, the deaf hear, the mute speak, the demons cast out. He wants to ask Jesus something, but he doesn't know what it is or how to ask it. There's Jesus, this man from God who acts like God. Who on earth is He? Nicodemus saw Jesus as a human only who has been blessed by God but not that Jesus is divine — the Son of God. He believes that God is working through Jesus, but that Jesus is not God. He believes that Jesus has a special relationship with God, but is not God Himself.

Jesus tosses Nicodemus a curve ball with a double "Amen," "truly, truly." Jesus is prepping Nicodemus, this is true that which I am about to say to you: "Unless one is born from above, he isn't able to see the kingdom of God." Is that what you want to know but are afraid to ask, Nicodemus? Do you want to see the kingdom of God? You need to be re-created, re-born from above. Your works and efforts can't do it. No one can. You need to become something completely new, a new creation.

Nicodemus is puzzled. How? "How can an old Jewish rabbi like me be born a second time? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?" What are you saying, Jesus?

Jesus tosses Nicodemus a fastball, again with a double "Amen". "Unless one is born of water and Spirit, he isn't able to enter the kingdom of God. You see, what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." Don't try to rationalize it or put it into one of your neat little boxes. You can no more box up the Spirit than you can capture the wind. All you can do is listen, hear His voice preaching to you, and receive it in faith.

Do you see it? The gift of baptism is so astounding Jesus calls it being born again – the second birth. Just as our physical birth is sheer gift, without our decision or control, so also spiritual rebirth is sheer gift, without our decision or control!

Like the winter Nevada wind blows down the mountain in a way that you cannot fully comprehend or control, so conversion happens in a radical, mysterious way that you cannot fully comprehend and that you cannot control. The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. So it is with you, dear Christian. The Spirit has willed to blow over you in the washing of rebirth.

Water and Spirit. That's the creative womb for the Word to conceive and bear. Oh what a miracle God gives as we are knit together in our mother's womb. If just one of those knitting together miracles failed to happen, it would mean the end of the human race. But Jesus points to an even greater miracle. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

For Nicodemus, he thought that his inheritance into God's kingdom was an automatic ticket by virtue of his genealogy with Abraham, much like many place trust in their Lutheran genealogy. He thought that he won favor with God through his holiness by an act of the human will. We should be clear, Nicodemus and the Pharisees stood for the best of what people see in one another; respectability, leadership, broadmindedness, highly "religious," even a desire to see some good in this new teacher (even to recognize him as being from God in some sense). Nicodemus would have never confessed, "I am by nature sinful and unclean and have sinned against You." Nicodemus saw God as one whom he pleased through his works. Nicodemus thought that he had God all figured out.

"Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" Indeed he was! Wise and respected Nicodemus, in the strength of his own spiritual insights, was confused and deficient. In fact, he was totally blind. Apart from Christ, that blindness is shared by every secular and every religious teacher in this cursed and passing world. It is also shared by those who follow such teachers.

He knew there was a blessing from God, but did not understand what it was. Like so many the blessings sought were that of material and worldly stature. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, to improve the world, to fix the world, to rehabilitate the world, or to make the world a nicer place to live. He came to save the world through faith in Him. He came to bring a new birth to the world, a birth from above, a birth of water and Spirit. He did it by dying on a cross, by having the Spirit depart from Him and the water mixed with blood flow from His wounded side. The Son of Man lifted up on the cross to save you.

For God so loved...The motive is God's love! The beating heart of all that we are and all that we receive is God's love! God is love and He loves us! For God so loved...

the world. The field of operation ie world... The scope of His love excludes no one. God desires none to perish who have ever lived in this world. That includes you! That includes everyone you know!

that he gave ...The action is from God to us as pure gift! He didn't negotiate or strike up a bargain. He didn't wait for us to make the first move, for we could not. He didn't just plan to do something! He gave! He gave a gift of love to the whole world!

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. That's His gift of love – the Son of God. God's gift of love is the one telling Nicodemus that he must be born again. Now God's gift of love is on the earth in the flesh to be lifted up in like manner on the cross.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. The one thing standing between us and hell is the Son of God. Whoever believes in Him is drawn to Him by His being hoisted up (lifted up) on the cross. Peace with God comes by way of this ultimate violence, by the blood He shed for us there. The ultimate mystery of God is not that He is one God in three persons but that He loves us like this!

Dear saints born of water and Spirit, Jesus talks to Nicodemus about the promised Messiah, Himself, saying "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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."

Here is the love of God. You are baptized into Christ. Believing in His Name, you are born again from above. This is not your doing any more than your first birth was your doing. No one asked if you wished to be born the first time, and no one asked you the second time. This is who you are: a child of God, an heir of life, called out of darkness into light, called out of the night into the day. Here is the love of God. He loves the world to death in the death of His Son. His shed body and shed blood are given to you today for your life. From His Altar, the sacrificed and risen Body and Blood is placed onto your lips. It will be put in your mouth and make you clean. Your guilt removed. That which has appeased God's wrath on your behalf will be joined to you.

"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." Blessed are you Oh sons and daughters of Abraham.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.