

Sermon: Second Sunday in Lent
Theme: Reborn, Renewed, Refocused
Text: John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

² He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.'

³ Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.'

⁴ 'How can someone be born when they are old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!'

⁵ Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'

⁹ 'How can this be?' Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ 'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.'

¹⁶ For 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

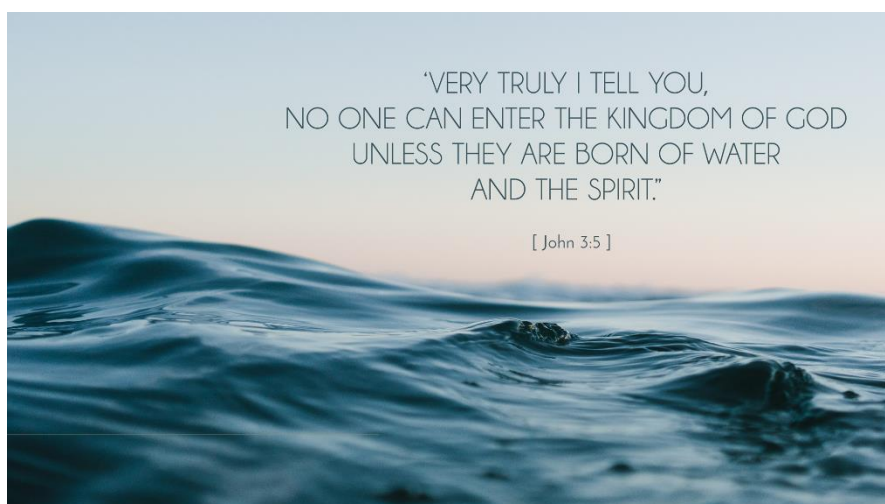
None of us need to be convinced that the world is constantly changing. Perhaps we used to think that change was progressive and manageable, and our world was heading mostly in the right direction. But then COVID-19 hit, and Russia invaded Ukraine. The future is more uncertain than ever.

As you'll hear later on in the report about the Lutheran Church's General Convention of Synod, change is also impacting our church. We continue to live in the middle of a long-term disagreement about whether women can be pastors as well as men. And many congregations across the church in Australia and New Zealand have suffered significant decline, and our church is facing great financial challenges. The church, like every institution in our world, is struggling to know how to respond. We wonder and we worry about what is ahead.



I wonder if Nicodemus had any of these questions as he came to see Jesus one dark night. He was an influential person, a Pharisee, someone who took God and faith seriously. Furthermore, he was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. So why does Nicodemus seek Jesus out? Well, Jesus is making quite an impression. People say that he has turned water into wine at a wedding where the wine ran out, a welcome miracle if ever there was one. And a second miracle, and one much less welcome, overturning the moneychangers' tables in the temple.

As he meets Jesus, Nicodemus is generous in his praise, and there's no reason to think he isn't being genuine. **"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."** That's true, of course, but in a way that Nicodemus can't yet grasp.



Jesus wastes no time with pleasantries. He drops the first of three huge and perplexing statements that shake up Nicodemus' world. **"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."** Or born from above. This is a big statement, and Nicodemus struggles to make sense of Jesus' words. What's birth got to do with anything.

Wasn't circumcision, and heritage, the way that people came into the kingdom. That's the way it's always been. Jesus' statement does not compute. **"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can anyone enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born again?"**

We might very well have asked a similar question. Nicodemus is comfortable with the way things are. The Sanhedrin tries to keep good order, all the while waiting for God's promised Messiah. But Nicodemus is yet to recognise the one to whom he is talking.

Jesus answers Nicodemus' question with another challenging statement: **"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."** No doubt Nicodemus would have been keeping a close eye on John the Baptist, and his preaching of baptism for the repentance of sins. Keeping people's focus on God was a good thing. But Jesus is talking about something else. Luther paraphrases Jesus' answer to Nicodemus. "Now my dear Nicodemus. I am not moved by your beautiful words. You must give up your old life and become a new man." Jesus is not talking about change by degrees, but total transformation. And this will not come about through a change of thinking, but through a change of being, a divine rebirth.

Jesus goes on: **"What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."** Our physical birth, our human descent, has left us with a whole lot of problems. As members of the human race, we are estranged from God, disqualified from life in God's kingdom. Pedigree won't save us. Nor will breaking life down into minute laws and regulations, as a way of trying to obey God. Nicodemus was still thinking of God's kingdom in these terms. But more of the same will simply not cut it.

That's why Jesus speaks about being born from above. Not a second physical birth, but a new spiritual birth. **"You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."**

This is truly radical. It flies in the face of the way that both Nicodemus and we look at life. Nicodemus knew the religious system of his time well. But the ultimate end of God's law was not human perfectibility but guilt and despair. Change could only come from outside, and in such a way that it brought an end to the old system and replaced with something unprecedented, yet promised by God.

This spiritual birth, **'being born from above'**, is God's gift and effort-the Spirit of God, hovering over the waters of baptism, the creative word working with power to bring us rebirth, an entry point into the life of God and his countless blessings. This is what John is talking about in the prologue to his gospel: **"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."** And this is God's gift to us in our baptism: **"the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom God poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour."**

Nicodemus is still struggling to understand what he's heard. Jesus gently chides him, **"You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?"** Too true, he doesn't get it. And I don't blame him. This is something that has come down from heaven: the wisdom of God, the Son of God, standing before him, unfolding the way that God will bring new life to his people.

Jesus draws Nicodemus' attention to something he does know from the Exodus journey. God's people flouted his command. He sent snakes to punish them, but then also provided a way out. **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."**

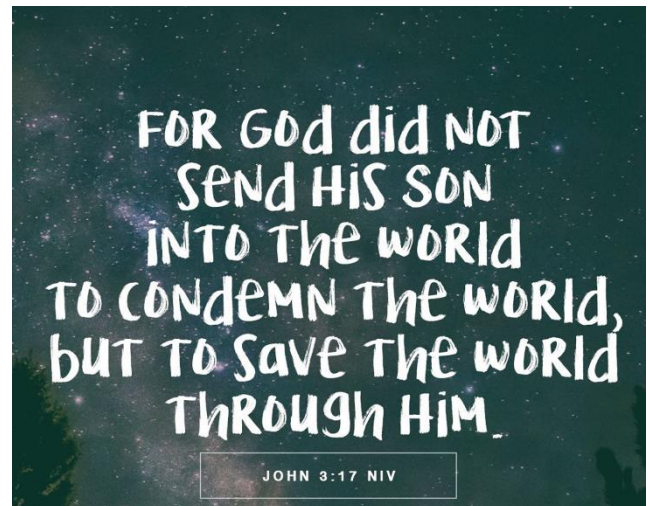
Nicodemus doesn't yet know what we do, that Jesus will be lifted up in his dying on the cross, and that those who look on him and who place their trust in him will be made new, their sins forgiven, their hearts made clean, their thinking changed, their very being renewed. But he did come to understand. After Jesus had died, he brought a mixture of spices to assist in the burial of Jesus' body. His discipleship was now plain for others to see.

The cross shone a light on this conversation, and especially on John 3:16. **"For God loved the world in this way: he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."**

Human beings were in a desperate situation. Desperate times call for desperate measures. We had run out of ideas, but God hadn't. He gave up his Son for us. His Son is the greatest gift, the one whose life gives us the greatest gift-deep, lasting life, with death destroyed, no longer able to harm us.



John reminds us that this truth is not our personal possession. God loved the world, literally the cosmos, everyone and everything. **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”** The church is not in the condemnation business, sitting back and lobbing hand grenades at the messed up world outside these walls. **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** Too true and let us not forget it.



Yet we do forget. I wonder what God makes of the LCANZ and the way we have been so internally focused for the last quarter of a century, at least at synodical level. Could it be that Jesus is reminding us today that our greatest resource is not our intellect and our planning skills, our synod resolutions, but the new birth that we have received in Jesus Christ, and the life and wisdom of the Holy Spirit washing through our veins, changing our living and our thinking. The God we trust wants his good news to get a good hearing in the world, through us. Even though we may feel inadequate and overwhelmed, distracted and disheartened even, today Jesus reminds us that we have been reborn of water and the Spirit, when we were baptised. We believe in the **“God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.”** Just as God broke into an unsuspecting yet needy world in the time of Nicodemus, so he does still today with his gospel, through the church, his born-from-above people, you and I. Amen.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook