

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
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Worship Theme: Born From Above

Genesis 12:1–4a,; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17; John 3:1–17

It is fascinating to note that one of the most often quoted scripture passages begins in a secret and mysterious meeting at night, where nobody but Jesus and Nicodemus was supposed to know what is going on. To meet privately with someone about a personal concern or to clarify one's understanding about a situation is perfectly legitimate. This was what Nicodemus did with Jesus. We also know that Nicodemus might have been afraid of his fellow Pharisees seeing him talking to Jesus. Jesus was not in good standing with the Pharisees, so being secret and mysterious about this appointment might have been wise. None-the-less, it is still interesting how public this "clandestine" conversation has become.

Faith in God in Jesus Christ can be just like this, both private and public. Publicly, we mention faith many times over in our worship service in the hymns, creeds, sermon or prayers. We ask people to make a public confession of their private faith in baptisms as we did today when we baptized Gavin John Holmes; and will do when Chris and Cori Cooper, John and Pat Holmes, and Paul Hartman join the church; and when Patty Bennett is ordained and installed as an elder. Faith in God in Jesus Christ can be just like this, both private and public.

There is another faith issue raised by the conversation Nicodemus had with Jesus that has public and private implications. As Paul referred to in Romans, we human beings often struggle with discerning the differences among faith, law and good works, and how these affect our salvation or right relationship to God. As private as we may want to be about this confusion, we are not alone. In fact, some of us may be as secretly curious and confused as Nicodemus was about how to have a right standing with God. The mystery of faith can be confusing to us. Examining the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus might be of some help as we wrestle with faith, law and good works.

As we begin, we need to notice again that Nicodemus came at night. For the writer of John, night represented separation from God. So, even though Nicodemus sought Jesus, he was still separated from God. Yet, he wanted a closer relationship to God. Even in his confusion on the mystery of faith, Nicodemus recognized Jesus as a rabbi sent from God who might help him. He saw all this in Jesus' works. Nicodemus knew that Jesus' miracles that could only be done by God's power.

Now it was wonderful that Nicodemus made this recognition that Jesus was sent by God, and that Jesus did wondrous works, but this was not faith in Christ. It was just the recognition of Jesus' works, and it may have been a wise act of respect toward Jesus, and no more. As Paul pointed out, such an act of recognition is something we can brag about, but it is not an act of faith. We might see or meet famous authors, doctors, politicians, teachers, movie stars and musicians, and we may admire their work, but that does not mean we have a personal relationship to them or have placed our faith in

them. So it was with Nicodemus at this point with Jesus. He could have bragged, “Hey everyone I met and talked with Jesus, a very godly man.” But, it did not change his life. It was not faith.

Jesus, recognizing that Nicodemus had sought him out and was feeling separated from God, gave a surprising response that was an invitation to faith in Jesus. As eavesdroppers on the conversation, let us listen closely to Jesus’ words. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Also later in verse 7 Jesus says, “You must be born from above.”

“Hey wait, one of us might say, “I thought it was, ‘You must be born again?’ What is going on here?” The truth is that the word that Jesus used in the Greek was “anōthen.” We cannot accurately translate this word into English because it speaks of two actions happening at the same time. In English, the best we can do is to say it means “again, or anew and from above” all at once. To say, “born again or anew,” speaks of a time of birth. Somewhere in our lives we realize that we have a new life or see life in a new way. To say, “born from above,” tells us that place from where we are born. “Above,” refers to God as the source of the new life we experience. To be born again, anew or from above means we have a new access to God and are a part of the kingdom of God. The often said simple phrase, “You must be born again” is really complex and is best expressed, “You must be born again or anew and from above all at once.”

Like us, Nicodemus did not understand Jesus’ complex usage of the Greek “anōthen,” and thought that Jesus meant only “born again.” He then asked the logical question, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus was still thinking human action, which is law and works salvation. As Paul wrote in Romans 4 concerning those who try to earn their way to God, “Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due.” Nicodemus was wondering what he must do to be worthy to be right with God. He saw his being right with God as a payment to him by God for doing good. **But**, Nicodemus’ understanding of Jesus’ complex usage of the Greek “anōthen” was as flawed as ours often can be.

We cannot earn or deserve our way to salvation or heaven.

Salvation and heaven are 100% gifts of grace from God, and so is the faith in God in Jesus Christ that we profess privately and publically in baptisms, joining the church and in being ordained or installed as church officers. Jesus was steering Nicodemus’ thinking so that he might realize that the mysterious gift of faith, of radical new birth that comes from God above, is the first step in discipleship and salvation in the Kingdom of God. The truth of the matter is that we do not take the first steps toward God in faith, but God takes the first steps toward us as he causes us to be born from above.

I like how this process is described in the Directory of Worship (W-1.1002a God’s Initiative) of our Book of Order. “The Spirit of God quickens (awakens) people to an awareness of God’s grace and claim upon their lives. The Spirit moves them to respond by naming and calling upon God, by remembering and proclaiming God’s acts of self-revelation in word and deed, and by committing their lives to God’s reign in the world.” This is what Jesus speaks of when he refers to the radical new birth from above.

Jesus went a step further when he played on Nicodemus' idea of birth from the womb and the water of the womb by replying, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." Jesus is telling us that to be born into the kingdom of God requires a double birth; physical birth meaning we must be born into this world; and also spiritual rebirth into the kingdom of God. Notice that the spirit and the flesh are held together as one. For Jesus, there is no separation of the two. We cannot say that we have been spiritually reborn or born from above and then do whatever we want with our bodies, or minds and hearts. To be spiritually reborn or born from above means that every part of us belongs to God. Again, all of rebirth is a gift from God, and is initiated by God.

Then Jesus re-emphasized "anōthen," you must be born again, anew or from above, and God's initiation of this process in us. In this re-emphasis, he used the image of the wind, "The wind 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." The word for wind here in the Greek is *pneuma*, which means both wind and spirit. It is through this Holy Spirit, which is as mysterious as the blowing wind, God initiates the gift of faith in Jesus Christ within us. It is beyond our understanding or control. It is all in God's hands.

"Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Old Nic asks the same question we often ask of Jesus. How does this mysterious gift of faith, this being born from above, again and anew work? "Behind all this is really the fear that the source of our faith and our salvation, like the wind is out of our control and we do not like that. Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?'" He might ask us today, "You are followers of mine who confess your faith many times over each Sunday and yet, you do not understand these things?" We might respond, "This is true Lord, for the concept of faith is hard to comprehend at times."

Jesus responded with how this mysterious gift of faith and salvation came to be. At first his explanation seems more obscure than helpful. Jesus said, "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.(Numbers 21: 5-9), so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Now remember we are eavesdropping on this conversation and I can hear us whispering to each other, "What is he talking about?" Jesus was reminding us that he is from heaven, that he will ascend to heaven and that he is God's source of our being born again, anew and from above. But to get to this point, he had to die on the cross for our sake.

The public declaration of faith found in verses 16-17 sum this up so well. "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." "Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

See again how God took the first steps in Christ to gift us from above with this marvelous thing called faith that leads to eternal life. It is important that we realize that eternal life “does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God.” Eternal life is not something put off until after we die. It begins for each of us in this world when God takes the first steps toward us through the Holy Spirit. This wind or Spirit from above then awakens within us the gift of faith in God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. All this movement of God towards us results in our experience of eternal life, now and forever. [New Interpreter’s Bible Vol. IX, page 552.](#)

Our response to these gifts from above of faith and eternal life involves several actions. We must rely on God’s grace as we live out and share the Christian faith with children we baptize like Gavin John Holmes. By God’s grace, we also guide and nurture them by word and deed, with love and prayer. This is true, too, for all the youth and adults who come to us in the daylight, or in the secret of night like Nicodemus, seeking what it means to be born again, anew and from above. May the wind of God also blow the saving gift of faith in Jesus Christ into their lives. Many thanks to Professor Gail O’ Day for her ideas in the [New Interpreter’s Bible Vol. IX, pages 548-555](#) that guided much of this sermon.