

2 Lent  
March 5, 2023

In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen.

**Sermon by Rev. Renee LiaBraaten**

As usual, I have a couple questions for you this morning:

What are some things that are invisible like the wind...things that we cannot see, but that we know exist?

For this second question, I'd just like to see a show of hands. How many of you would say that you have been "born again?"

The phrase "born again" has become a sort of code language that divides Christians into two groups. Depending on which group you identify with, the question, "Are you born again?" could mean "Are you saved, like us?" or "Are you a religious fanatic, like them?"

And the same thing is true when it comes to the 16<sup>th</sup> verse of our Gospel lesson, often reduced to the words: John 3:16. It is the most familiar and the most often quoted verse in the Bible. In fact, it is one of the few Bible verses that even Episcopalians and Lutherans, who are not typically known for their Bible quoting ability, can recite by heart.

We see this verse on highway road signs, on bumper stickers and on hand-made signs held up at sporting events: John 3:16. Among Christians and non-Christians, this verse has become associated with a certain kind of religious fervor, which, once again, divides Christians into those who identify with this kind of religious zeal and those who don't.

A lot of polarization and stereotyping has resulted from the different ways that people interpret and use the words that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus. To clarify the meaning of Jesus' words, more recent translations of the Bible have replaced the phrase "born again" with "born anew" or "born from above." This morning, let's set all that aside, and give these words of Jesus a chance to be "born again" in our hearts.

All of our readings today remind us that life is a journey, and that God calls us to journey through this life **by faith, not sight**. This involves trusting in an invisible God. Even though we can't see God or prove that God exists, we trust that God is with us, watching over our going out and our coming in, and guiding us through whatever we encounter. We are each on a **faith** journey. And the Spirit of God is always at work within us, growing us in grace and faith. Like Abraham, sometimes moving forward in our journey of faith, means we have to leave some things behind.

In our gospel today, we get a glimpse into the faith journey of Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a really

smart and very accomplished fellow when it comes to matters of faith. He is a Pharisee—an expert in the interpretation of Jewish religious laws and a ruler over the religious life of the Jewish people.

John does not tell us what motivated this clandestine night visit from Nicodemus. But it took place shortly after Jesus showed up at the Temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover. Jesus created a huge scene by making a whip out of leather cord and driving the money changers out of the Temple. At this time in history, the Jews were a religious minority, living in an occupied territory of the Roman Empire. The Pharisees needed to keep the peace and maintain the status quo in order to keep their religious and political power. They couldn't risk letting anything happen that would draw unwanted Roman attention. So, perhaps Jesus' provocative "disturbance of the peace" at the Temple had something to do with this visit.

It isn't surprising, given that Nicodemus is a religious scholar, that the first thing he says to Jesus is, "Rabbi, we **know** that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

And Jesus basically replies, "Actually Nicodemus, you don't **know**. Seeing these signs that I do and focusing on these signs is to miss the point of what I am doing. The point is to see the kingdom of God in what I'm doing. But you can't see the Kingdom of God unless you have been "*born from above*."

But Nicodemus did not have the advantage of recent translations of this passage, so he heard, "born again." He takes this very literally, and proceeds to question how a grown man can enter into his mother's womb for a second time and be "born again."

To which Jesus replies, "Nicodemus, I am not talking about entering your mother's womb, I'm talking about entering the Kingdom of God. Life consists of flesh and spirit—the visible and the invisible. There is a physical birth and there is a spiritual birth. I'm talking about being *born of the spirit*."

But this is very confusing to Nicodemus's rational, highly educated, law-oriented way of thinking and he responds, "How can these things be?"

And Jesus' reply has echoed down through the centuries, "God so **loved** the world..." Through these words, Jesus is saying, "Nicodemus, you don't see or enter the kingdom of God through the **power of the law**. You see and enter the kingdom of God through the **power of love**."

And thus begins the next chapter in the faith journey of Nicodemus. Up to this point, Nicodemus believed that being faithful to God was about **keeping the rules** rather than about being drawn into an ever-deepening **relationship with a God who loves the world**. The faith of Nicodemus pointed to a God who loved religious observances more than people.

But Jesus taught and embodied that **keeping the law** must never get in the way of **fulfilling the heart of the law**, which is to **love God and our neighbor**. Jesus refused to live by the hierarchical divisions and religious exclusivity of his time. He challenged the practice of confining God's redemptive action to one's own race, one's own religious institution, or one's own political party. He insisted that God's love was poured out on **all** people. "For God so loved the world..." Jesus reminds us that we are not called to set ourselves apart from others, but to serve others. We are not called to prove that we are good and righteous in God's sight. We are called to prove that God *so loves* the world—graciously, mercifully, faithfully, devotedly — and universally.

This conversation with Jesus creates a tiny crack in Nicodemus's certainty about what he **knows**. But to keep moving forward in his journey of faith, Nicodemus will need to leave some things behind, including his very privileged position in the system. Nicodemus is not ready to do this. But, later in John's gospel, we will get a couple updates on how Nicodemus is progressing in his ongoing faith journey.

So, what about us? How are things going on our faith journeys? What are we being asked to leave behind in order to keep growing in grace and faith? What do we **know** that may be getting in the way of our love for God and others? Here at St. Cyprians, how we interpret the Word of God and how we apply that Word to our daily lives and societal issues is very important to us. But sometimes those things that are most important to us can become the very things that trip us up.

Let me share an example from my own faith journey to show you what I mean.

I'm not exactly sure when it started, but by the time I had finished seminary, I had grown these invisible "bad theology" antennae. Whenever I was in conversation with anyone from a more fundamental Christian tradition, my antennae would start to quiver and my internal judgments would begin: "How can such an intelligent person interpret the Bible in such a simplistic, literal way? The Bible cannot be reduced to such black and white statements. Faith is much more grey. It's much more complex. You have to leave room for mystery."

But then, I had my very own "born again" experience. Thirteen years ago, I was in Spring Hill, TN with my extended family, to celebrate my baby brother's 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. On Sunday we all attended the church his family went to at the time. It was a rapidly growing 3,000 member Baptist congregation. My sister's twin boys were 5 years old, and they started to have a melt down when we tried to leave them in the church nursery. So, we decided to take them to the worship service with us.

I was put in charge of Gabie. As we walked into the massive sanctuary, the first thing we saw was this large, lighted pool of water built into the front wall above the stage where the Praise Band was singing.

My little Lutheran nephew exclaimed, "Wow!"  
"Shhh!" I quieted Gabie. "We need to use our whisper voices in church."

The minute we sat down, his questions began,

“Auntie Nee, is that real water?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a swimming pool?”

“No. That’s where they baptize people.”

“Can I get baptized?”

“You already are baptized, honey. Uncle Jer and Auntie Nee baptized you when you were a baby.”

“In a pool?”

“Not exactly.”

“But I want to be baptized here in that pool.”

Right about then the pastor appeared by the pool with two men in white robes. Each man gave a testimony, and as they talked about their conversion experience, my invisible “bad theology antennae” began to perk up. And so did Gabie, who was absolutely enthralled by this whole process.

Needless to say, by the time the sermon began, my “bad theology antennae” were on full alert. The pastor began his sermon by explaining that there were many in their community of faith who were going through a very difficult time because the GM Plant in town was closing. He explained that one of the most important things we do as the body of Christ is to pray for each other and support each other in hard times. Because there was so much pain and anxiety in their community, today they were going to claim the promises of God when it came to the power of prayer.

He asked everyone who had lost or would soon lose their job to stand up and walk to one of the aisles. I could not believe how many people moved to the aisles. There were probably about 500 people worshipping in the sanctuary and it seemed like nearly a quarter of them were standing in the aisles. Then the pastor instructed everyone who felt comfortable doing so, to gather around these brothers and sisters, lay their hands on them and pray. Over half the congregation got up, encircled those standing in the aisles and began to pray.

I had never heard that many people praying individual prayers all at once. They were not speaking in tongues, just earnestly praying for these members who were struggling. I could feel the power of God in that room. It was incredible. It was like Pentecost. The Spirit of God was blowing through that sanctuary, and the still small voice of the Spirit blew through me and said, “Renee, you are saved by grace, not good theology.”

In that “born again” experience, the Holy Spirit made it crystal clear to me that God is way beyond the scope of any theology or anything we can **know**. And yet, 13 years later, at this point in my faith journey, I continue to struggle with keeping my “bad theology” antennae in check.

For instance, in the neighborhood where Rev. Jerry and I live, there is a huge Baptist church, and they are in the midst of building a big addition. Every Sunday morning, we drive by this church on our way to St. Cyprian’s, and there are all these cars flowing into their parking lots. And, well,

it bothers me. I find myself asking the Nicodemus question, “How can these things be?” I **know** that we are called to love God and love our neighbor. And, many of the people who go to this church are literally my neighbors. But I still have this tendency to separate myself from them because my understanding of God and faith feels so different from theirs.

The Holy Spirit has to keep reminding me, over and over, that when it comes to God and faith, no individual, no church or no denomination gets it all right or all wrong. We each have our own vantage point, and our own blinders when it comes to understanding this mystery called God, and these gifts called grace and faith.

Jesus teaches us, as he taught Nicodemus, that faith is not about what we **know**. Faith does not live in the head, it lives in the heart. Fortunately, Jesus does not call us to agree theologically. But Jesus does call us to love one another as God so loved the world. And Jesus calls us to live together in that peace which passes all understanding—and misunderstanding. Today, Jesus reminds us that the journey of faith involves being born again...and again...and again...and again... Amen.