

“Shaped by new birth”

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
(March 5, 2023)

I want to begin with an observation. As I was preparing the sermon this week, it struck me: just how many years of experience we have right here – walking the path of faith. I look around the sanctuary and I see many folks who’ve been followers of Jesus for a long time. I was baptized upon profession of faith in March 1970. That’s 53 years ago. And I suppose I was a follower of Jesus even before that. In fact, it’s hard to remember a time in my life when faith wasn’t part of who I am.

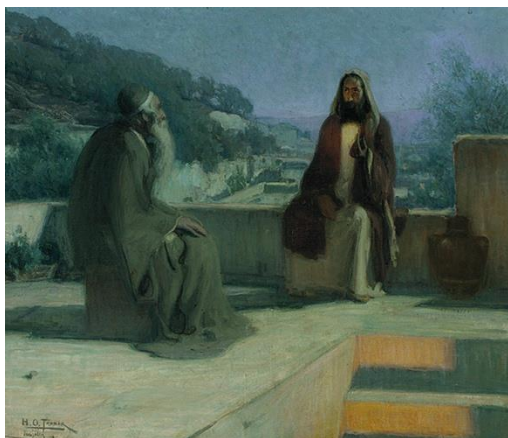
How about you? How long have you been at it? Look around and add up all the lived experience of people who are here today. All the faithfulness and prayer that have gone up from this place.

So what do you reckon? Take my 53 years and add it to your 50 or 60 – or 2 or 3 – and what would you get? What would the sum total of our journey be?



We can be expected to have a few grey hairs among us! And the reason I’m talking about all this is because I notice something in our Gospel reading, in the story of Nicodemus. Can you see it too? I don’t know how I missed it before!

By the time Nicodemus comes to Jesus he’s already spent a lot of years on faith. He’s a mature believer. But this morning we hear Jesus calling him to go further. And the way to do that is actually to go back to the place where he began and make a new beginning.



Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1859-1937.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henry_Ossawa_Tanner_-_Jesus_and_nicodemus.jpg

“Now there was a Pharisee, named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.” You don’t get to be a leader of any religious community without a bit of time and experience under your belt.

See this painting? Jesus is on the right. Nicodemus on the left. The artist does not portray him as a young man!

Nicodemus was part of a community of dedicated lay folk – not professionally trained like the scribes – but very pious and devout. The Pharisees were mostly good-intentioned people doing their best to please God. We’ve been unfair, painting *all* Pharisees with the same brush, as hypocrites. *This* Pharisee came to Jesus to make a genuine inquiry.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” We’ve seen the things you do. Nicodemus is a very observant fellow. He’s seen something in Jesus and he wants to know more.



Now listen to what Jesus says. “I tell you, Nicodemus, no one sees the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Or born again. The Greek word “anothen” can be understood either way.

Nicodemus takes it as born *again*, and gets his brain wrapped up in a knot because of it. What do you mean by that? “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” he asks. No, of course not. Jesus, what are you trying to tell me here? Speak plainly, so I can understand.

Nicodemus needs new birth. But he can’t, for the life of him, figure out how to do that. Are you confused? Do you know what Jesus is talking about?



Before you rush to answer, I want assure those who may be having some difficulty. If you don’t have an answer on the tip of your tongue, you’re in good company. These words aren’t straightforward. And Nicodemus is no fool.

If you do have an easy answer, I want to caution you. Because there is a *mystery* in this. It’s not just a matter of two or three simple steps done in the proper order and automatically you’re in. I know we’ve sometimes been told that.

But listen to what Jesus says. New birth is a mysterious business. Like the wind that no one can see. You can’t say to the wind, come here, do this. Because the wind is a power unto itself. “It blows where it wills,” says Jesus. “You do not know where it comes from, or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”



This new birth must be *God’s* doing. God, the giver of life, gives new life. God, the one who formed us from the dust of the earth, and breathed into our nostrils the breath of life ... this same God must blow the wind of the Spirit again, re-shaping us, transforming us. (cf. Genesis 2:7)

This is not a birth that comes as a result of our doing at all, it is a birth that comes as a result of God’s doing. It is birth from *above*. Flesh is flesh, Jesus says, but I’m talking about Spirit ... The life-giving Spirit that blows into our lives, renewing our vision, redirecting our path. Turning us toward God and neighbour, forming a new community, a kingdom community, of God’s people. And that’s a whirlwind of an answer for you, isn’t it!



What’s wrong, Nicodemus? Why are you so baffled? “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand?”

Have we been Christians all these years and still don’t know? Still struggle to see God’s kingdom, to find it and know it and enter it? A teacher of the church, a respected elder in the congregation, a pastor for goodness sake! All these years, and you still don’t fully grasp it. Still haven’t got it completely figured out!

I hope there’s no one among us who thinks they have the life of God’s realm completely figured out! Because that is dangerous. That would be claiming far too much for ourselves. We are not God. We always, always, have more to learn about living and being and walking in God’s way.

So Nicodemus, it’s time to set aside some of your certainties and allow the Spirit of God to open an adventurous Kingdom way.





In another place, Jesus took a child and put that little person in the midst of those much older disciples, and said: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

Amongst other things, I think Jesus means that we have to go back, so that we can go forward. We unlearn some things, so that we can learn new things. Or maybe learn those old things in a brand new life-giving way!

In our first scripture passage we heard about God’s call to Abram and Sarai, which is a call to set out on a journey, leaving the place you’ve been, the land you’ve loved, the kindred and country that’s become so familiar.

You need to leave that place Abram, and follow my leading, trusting that I will make you a great nation – something more than you are at present. I will bring you into a new and promised land. So come and follow me.



This is the story of our Lenten journey. Jesus calls us to leave familiar ways. Yet we are often reluctant to do so. Sometimes we prefer those well-worn paths we’ve trod to the risky way of following Jesus into God’s bright new world.

It’s like having a carpet in your home that’s starting to show some wear. You can read the path you follow in the fraying and discolouration that’s left behind. Over and over again we walk that same old path. Another scandal, another falsehood, another war. Another argument with others. Another failure to be the person God is calling me to be. Who will save us?



The invitation that comes to us in Lent is to make a fresh start. To allow God’s Spirit, the wind that blows from heaven, to come and recreate us. To find a new way of seeing the world and living our lives – the Kingdom way that God reveals. “Come on, Nicodemus. You may not fully understand what I’m saying – I don’t expect you to – I just ask you to believe”

Believe that God loves you. Believe that God loves the whole world, and gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him – and I mean everyone, not just you – everyone who puts their *trust* in Jesus, enough to follow, enough to take one more step toward the kingdom ... may not perish but may have eternal life. What a promise!



If you could make a fresh start, even in just one area of your life, what would it be? If you could learn a new way, move in a new direction? Leave behind some destructive old pattern that’s wearing away the goodness of your life, and harming your relationships with others? Leave that thread-bare path ... and *believe* in Jesus – enough to choose another way ... Discover that new life, that gracious gift of eternal life that’s promised and available to us even here and now!

The Spirit blows where it will, says Jesus, bringing new life. So what might that new creation look like for you?



In this season of Lent, we're asked to remember our original creation as humans made in the image of God. And we're also thinking about about God *re-shaping* us into a fuller and more complete representation of our humanity.

In this life, we never arrive fully at our destination. But God is always wanting to mould our clay and shape our dust, so that our lives take on some new directions.

For example, leaving my home in Ontario and moving to Saskatchewan was a step for me. Leaving one congregation, and later accepting a call to become pastor of another – that was a step. Learning to relate to some people on the edges of my life in a healthier, less critical way, may be a place where God still wants to take me. That could be another step on this year's Lenten journey.

Am I willing to go? Are you? What would it look like for our *congregation* to be born again? What new step might God be inviting us to take?



I find great comfort in the fact that Nicodemus is not some young buck just beginning. He's been practising his faith for *years*, and still there's more to learn. Jesus tells Nicodemus he'll need to be born: Born *again*. Born from *above*, by the power of God's Spirit. We are always in need of new life.

The story of Nicodemus is a story for us *all*. Whether you've been a person of faith for 70 years, or 7 years. Or whether you have yet to make a commitment to this Christ who calls us.

Wherever you are on your journey, the invitation is to allow God's love to embrace you. God's Spirit to re-shape you. Allow this day to become a new beginning. May it be so. Amen.