

New City Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, OH
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Born to Give Us Second Birth

Introduction

Good morning. My name is Ryan Zhang, I am one of the pastors at New City. It's great to be with you on this Christmas Eve morning. I haven't had a white Christmas since my first Christmas in America in 1999, and there have been some talks about snow this afternoon, so I am praying.

Speaking of White Christmas, last week Josh talked about songs that get stuck in your head. I watched Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* for the first time two weeks ago, and ever since then I have a song from the movie stuck in my head. "Sister, sister..." I don't even know any of the words, but that tune is just so catchy and annoying.

So, I am glad to be preaching to you this morning, finishing up our series based on Charles Wesley's *Hark the Herald*. If nothing else, I am grateful to have a different song stuck in my head. As we've mention in the past four weeks, the song captures so well the Christian gospel. It summarizes who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do. For this final Advent Sunday, we come to the climax of this song, and the climax of Jesus' mission on earth. "Born that man no more may die, Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth." These words bring us to Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, which is where we get the term "born again Christians."

In recent decades, born-again Christians have a pretty bad reputation in society. When we think of them, we often have a flatten image of powerful emotional experiences, strict moral requirements, or conservative political agendas. Born-again Christians often come across as socially regressive and morally hypocritical. Unfortunately, I admit those criticisms are sometimes true. But when we read Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, he gives us a much more robust description of what born again looks like. This passage is loaded with deep theological ideas. It speaks of regeneration, baptism, illumination of the Holy Spirit, original sin, typology, even predestinations. But before I put y'all asleep, let me just say this.

A week from now, at 4:59 am eastern standard time, the people in Kiribati, which is a small island nation in the Pacific Ocean, will begin the countdown to 2018. For every hour after that, people from different parts of the world, including us in the continental United States, will have to say goodbye to 2017. The world will never step back into the year of 2017 again.

The ancient philosopher Heraclitus famously said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man." Life is a one-way street, you only get to live it once. We only have one chance to get it right. We prize our independence and freedom, but all of us are inevitably inching toward our certain death. If we live in this society long enough, we would discover that it is haunted by existential FOMO. What if the progress we

make won't mean anything? What if I am meant to do something else or be with someone else? What if believing in myself actually won't get me anywhere?

These doubts may be even more acute around the Christmas season, because it is the only season where some of us allow spirituality breaks into our secular lives. We tend to think deeper thoughts at the end of the year. If there is really a song that gets stuck in our collective memory during this time of the year, it is probably John Lennon's *Happy Christmas*. It just captures our doubts in this secular age so well.

So this is Christmas
And what have you done
Another year over
And a new one just begun
And so this is Christmas
I hope you have fun

A very Merry Christmas
And a happy new year
Let's hope it's a good one
Without any fear

Thinkers of all ages have shared these doubts because they also share our limitations: life can only be lived once. There is no second take. Nicodemus was perhaps one of such thinkers. He was a Pharisee, which means he was very devoted to the Jewish traditions and system of beliefs. Yet he had enough doubts to motivate him to come visit Jesus at night.

But the answer that Jesus gave him surprised him. Jesus says it is possible to be born again, not only that, it is NECESSARY to be born again. Naturally, Nicodemus was skeptical, "How can these things be?" So this morning I want to explore with you the possibility of being born again, and the path to be born again.

I. Possibility to Born Again

If you have watched any dramas, or read any Western novels, you would know that a visitor in the dark is never good. That's usually where the plot thickens. When we look at the context of this passage, we see all kinds of darkness shrouding this conversation

There is literal darkness. Nicodemus came to visit Jesus at night, so he could avoid detection. We could probably imagine him walking under the shadows with a large hood over his head. He was "a ruler of the Jews," powerful man in society, had to sneak around in the dark, because there is also circumstantial darkness. We don't know why Nicodemus had to come in the dark. Perhaps he had some sincere questions for Jesus, perhaps he wanted to come test Jesus, perhaps he wanted to warn Jesus about something. But he had to come in the dark because Jesus and the religious elites did not get along. The Pharisees have been seeking ways to undermine Jesus. That will finally end with the Pharisees plotting the murder of Jesus.

Then there's Nicodemus' intellectual darkness. Even though he was a teacher of Israel, he couldn't quite understand Jesus' words. In Biblical terms, we may say that Nicodemus was not dumb, but he was blind. And lastly, I would add spiritual darkness.

Nicodemus opens the conversation with a compliment to Jesus, he says in verse 2, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Whatever his intention was, Nicodemus was at least polite in his greeting. But Jesus did not reciprocate the compliment, he cut straight to the chase. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Now when Jesus uses the phrase "Truly, truly," or "Truly I say to you" in some translations, he is warning people to listen up. Hark! Whatever I am going to say is going to be very important.

But he does more, when Jesus REALLY wants to emphasize something, he also says it again. That's exactly what he does here, he says again in verse 5, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." TWICE Jesus speaks about being born again, and each time he expands upon his saying and raises the stake. The first time he says "unless you are born again, you cannot *see* the Kingdom." The second time he says, "unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you cannot *enter* the kingdom of God." Being born again is the only way we can understand and enter the kingdom of God.

This emphatic repetition just captures the spiritual darkness that we live in. We need radical transformation in our lives. It's like some houses in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. There was so much mold and dirt in them, that unless they are gutted to their bare bones, they can't be reused again.

The root of sin and darkness run so deep in our lives that nothing short of a rebirth will make us well again. This requires more than just an outward makeover. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." The same root will eventually produce the same fruits. As one theologian says, we can't just fix the swamp by pulling a few weeds. We need to plant a different kind of seed.

We sang about this this morning. "Adam's likeness, Lord, efface, Stamp Thine image in its place." The remnant of Adam's sinful nature must be erased and remade before we can have a new life. Long time ago, David recognizes this in Psalm 51, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Then he prays, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." He was born in sin and he lives in sin. Nothing he does can get rid of the corruption inside of him. He needed external help. Only a supernatural transformation can change him.

Think of a stubborn sin in your life, or a bad habit you are trying to kick. Is it enough to just change a little in your daily routine, or is there some deeper part of you that needs to be transformed? Maybe it is a sense of boredom that drives you to look at porn, or social anxiety that causes you to stumble over your words, or loneliness that makes you drink. Take a deeper look into your heart, and maybe you will realize there are parts of it that need to be born again too.

Now I know most cultures don't share this pessimistic view of human nature. The Chinese proverbs that I learned growing up teaches that "when someone is born, he was born good." Any corruption happens because of external influences. Most Americans would probably agree with this. If only we provide kids the right nurturing, they will be good and act rationally. Education, enlightenment, not transformation, are the answers to society's biggest problems.

But think of the weight of expectation this type of worldview puts on our kids and ourselves. The assumption is, if we give them the best educations and upbringing, everything will be OK. This is actually crushing for them and for us. If something goes wrong, we can't make sense of it. Do we push them to study or try harder? Or should we feel guilty about not providing them the best?

Or maybe look back at your own past. Even if you come from a good family background and received the best educations, can you honestly shout, "I HAVE LIVED UP TO ALL MY EXPECTATIONS. I AM AS GOOD AS I CAN POSSIBLY BE." If your answer is yes, please come see me after the service. I want to meet you, I want to get your autograph.

Acknowledging our spiritual darkness actually frees us from these crushing expectations, because the fault is not in our efforts or external behaviors. It is in our nature, in our core. And it doesn't have to end like this. Jesus offers the possibility to be born again.

How can this be? Nicodemus asks. He even uses some pretty crude language. Can an old man enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? That's a rhetorical question, of course not! Life is a one-way street. No one can ever go back in time to do life again. Sometimes when I wallow in self-pity I would imagine what life would be like if I can redo some of my past, what if I had taken a different job? What if I actually asked her out? What if I had tried harder in this class?

How do you leave behind your past? Your broken relationships, your bad dates, your criminal records. We live with different levels of regrets and guilt. If we have the choice, many of us may choose to go back and relive some of those moments. But that's not possible, and it's not what Jesus offers here. The gospel is not Groundhog Day, where the same characters live in the same disappointing realities and with the same results. Jesus is offering a new birth that goes much deeper. To be born again is not a chance to undo all our regrets, but it is being born into a Kingdom where there will be no regret. To be born again is not a chance to undo all our regrets, but it is being born into a Kingdom where there will be no regret. As C.S. Lewis writes at the end of Narnia, we will enter into a story where each chapter will be better than the last.

So Jesus describes in verse 3, being born again begins with the ability to SEE this Kingdom. We will have a different imagination of what our future will be. And faith, is the belief that nothing we do in our old nature can ever keep us from entering into the Kingdom of God. None of our regrets, mistakes, and sins will derail the trajectory of our eternity. Even death, is only a stop along our way to glory. At the end of this age, the whole creation will be born again. In the New Creation it will be impossible to find anything ugly, it will be impossible for us to sin. We will have new bodies, we will have a different kind of desires, a different way of work, a different sense of hope.

II. Path to Born Again

So back to Nicodemus' question, "How are these things possible?" Jesus describes for us the path to be born again. In verse 5 he says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

There was a sect in the early church called Gnosticism, you heard of them? They believed that the spirit is good and the flesh is bad. The goal of human life is to control the flesh until we rise into the spiritual realm. Well, this is NOT that. Yes, the physical world needs to be transformed, but Jesus' birth into our world reaffirm that this world is valuable to God. We need a transformation and rebirth, not an escape.

So then, what does Jesus mean by being born of water and the Spirit? He means it must be supernatural birth from above, it has to be the work of God. Jesus is most likely referring to Ezekiel 36. In one of the high points of Ezekiel's prophecy, God promises his people.

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

The Spirit replaces our old sinful heart with a new heart. I know it may not feel like it to you, but your conversion is every bit as miraculous as God raising someone from the dead. God takes our hearts that were bent to evil, and opens them to taste the sweetness of his grace. Before we could only stare into our material world, but now he gives us eyes to see his Kingdom.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saves a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I am found, was BLIND, but now I SEE."

And none of this is based on what we do. Look at Nicodemus, there is probably no one in Israel that is more educated, more powerful, and more religious than Nicodemus. He's a Pharisee, which means he carefully kept to the Jewish law. Jesus calls him a teacher of Israel, which means he must be well-versed in the Jewish Scriptures. Even this guy has to be born again. This shows that it is NOT based on who you know or what you do, this is entirely a work of God. Jesus compares the Spirit to the wind, just like the wind blows whichever way it wants, so does the Spirit comes and saves on its own terms. There's nothing we can do to earn or command it. But if you begin to find Jesus more and more beautiful, you begin to hunger and thirst for the God's Kingdom, you can be sure that the Spirit is working in you.

But God's work doesn't just stop there. Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 1, "when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." The Spirit is the deposit of the future Kingdom, like a little piece of the future implanted in us. You know the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, The Terminator? "I am

the terminator." He comes from the future. Well, we can all be terminators. We can't go back to the past, but the future does come to the present. Like one of my friends says, "In Christ, the future comes before the present."

Do you want to know what your future looks like? Do you know it's actually possible to look into the future? Here, let me show you, it does not look like the Terminator, but look to Jesus. He is the prototype of being born in the Spirit. The Greek word for born, is *gennao*, which can also be used a verb, meaning to conceive, to give birth. There are only two instances in the New Testament where this word does not describe a natural birth. The first time is in Matthew 1:20, where the angel tells Joseph, "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the...Holy Spirit." Jesus himself was born of the Holy Spirit. He is the Second Adam, whose image will be stamped in us by the Holy Spirit. He is the first fruits of the New Creation, pointing forward to the harvest that is to come. When we are resurrected from the dead, we will have an imperishable body like him. He is the one descended from above, to show us the path to the Kingdom.

Jesus tells Nicodemus in verse 13, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." He came down to show us the way. As I've said before, when we are lost in a forest, maps do us no good. What we really need is a guide. Jesus was born to guide us out of our darkness into the Kingdom. And not only that, he guarantees our way to the Kingdom. He was born to give us second birth, ironically, he does it through his death. He says in verses 14, "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."

This sounds so glorious and lofty, but do you know what Jesus is talking about? He refers to this again in John 12, he says, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." Then John adds, he says this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. He was talking about the cross. In Numbers 21, when the Israelites grumbled against God in the wilderness, God sent fiery serpents as a judgment to punish the people. Many people died. Then Moses prayed for the people, and God said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. Whoever looks on the bronze serpent was healed.

The symbol of death became a way of healing. That is what Jesus came to do. When he took on the punishment that should belong to us on the cross, this ancient symbol of shame and judgment became our healing. God was glorified in his death, because now when we look to the cross, we have new birth.

Many years later, perhaps reflecting on Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, John wrote in 1 John 5, "everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." God has opened our hearts and minds to believe in Jesus. We can see the Kingdom because we have already seen the King. As R.C. Sproul says, the term "born-again Christian" is redundant, because no one can be a follower of Jesus unless he's already born-again in the Spirit. John continues to write, "For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith." Our faith will deliver us even from the threat of death.

But our new birth also has a horizontal component. John continues to write, "and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him."

You know what is the other place in the New Testament where the word "born" does not describe a natural birth? It is in Paul's letter to Philemon, where he says "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment." More literally, whom I have begotten in my chains. Paul is describing a spiritual relationship, Onesimus is his child in Christ.

When we are born again in the Spirit, we have a new spiritual family. Even if you don't have a biological family on earth, even if you can never have biological children, you have a family. You are loved and accepted by God the Father, and you also have many many brothers and sisters from all over the world.

Many of you are probably eager for me to finish so you can go home to celebrate Christmas with your families. What I want to tell you is, don't be so eager to get out of here today. Linger a little bit and visit with the folks around you, because this is your true family. Even if you may not like the way they smell or the way they look, the folks next to you will be the people you will spend eternity with. Celebrate with them.

And if you are the New Year Resolution type, then instead of making resolutions that focus on your life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, make resolutions to live out the future. Remember, the Spirit has implanted a piece of the future in us. Pull a bit more of the future into the present. Live out a new kind of ethics, love your neighbors, give them a sense of what the future in the New Creation will look like. Spend more time to get to know the brothers and sisters around you. Pray, that the Father will make his will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Let the future transform the way you live in the present.