

## **Shaped in New Birth**

Menno Mennonite Church

March 5, 2023

**Purpose:** To expand the notion of born again from first time salvation.

**Message:** In the mystery of God, we are invited to be shaped newly in all stages of life.

**Scripture:** John 3:1–17 [I will read]; **Genesis 12:1–4a [Please read]**; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

**Synopsis:** Our takeaway from this story most often is the concept of being a 'born again Christian'. This is something that we generally reserve for those who are outside the faith and are coming into the faith. Yet Nicodemus is no new convert to the ways of YHWH—he is the very representation of Orthodoxy. He is the one to whom this should have been an obvious invitation. Sometimes it we whom are the most practiced in the ways of faith that are called to something new and to being reshaped into a new person, even as unbelievable as this may be.

**John 3:1-17** NRS

Now there was a Pharisee  
named Nicodemus,  
a leader of the Jews.

<sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him,  
"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."

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you,  
no one can see the kingdom of God  
without being born from above." <sup>4</sup>

Nicodemus said to him,  
"How can anyone be born after having grown old?  
Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered,  
"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God  
without being born of water and Spirit.

<sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh,  
and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

<sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you,  
'You must be born from above.'

<sup>8</sup> 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."

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him,  
"Are you a teacher of Israel,  
and yet you do not understand these things?"

<sup>11</sup> "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.

<sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,  
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

<sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven  
except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of God.

<sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,  
so must the Son of God be lifted up,

<sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son,  
so that everyone who believes in him  
may not perish  
but may have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world  
to condemn the world,  
but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The list of the impossible is a moving target. History is full of inventions, ideas, incidents, and gadgets whose heritages involve a strong amount being denounced as sheer impossibility. Benjamin Franklin was laughed out of the British Academy of Science for suggesting that the Lightning Rod could successfully re-route the energy of a bolt from the sky. The magazine *Scientific American* refused for 5 years to publish an account of the Wright Brother's initial experiments in heavier than air powered flight could only be explained as a fanciful hoax. Every age has its revelations. I remember considering the impossibilities of the original Star Trek wishing that even half of this could be possible. Now I feel somehow undressed if I find myself without my communicator/tricorder in my pocket. Even the potential of Fusion energy, a technology shrugged off as being at least 30 years away for the last 40 years seems somewhat plausible with at least a reaction that gave more energy than it required to start the reaction humming. It would seem that the more things are met with incredulity and ridicule, the more probable they are to happen. Those who set out to try the new are advised to pack a reasonable sense of humor as there is a strong likelihood of being laughed at along the way.

As great as our human capacity for imagination may be, there is a strong filter that we apply to the activity—that which seems possible or even probable. We understand the world and how it works even if we don't always like it. We laugh off the improbable, abandoning for good or ill our more fanciful imaginations somewhere alongside our childhood. Our rationale selves are much stronger at convincing ourselves of what Can't happen than what can. It is safer that way—it keeps our worlds intact. Indeed we need this because our imaginations are good at making more out of things than we ought. Yet we always need to question the stability of life as we know it with all the things that makes sense to us well installed and firmly in play with at least a small bias toward the glimmer of “but what if” that tests the new and allows us to adapt to that which might surprise. As incurably curious as we may be about the possible, we simply do not know what to do with those things beyond our imagination and the fear they can visit. Yes, there are many things impossible. But there is nothing that is impossible to God. That is our theology. That is our belief. That is our struggle.

Because by in large we don't expect a whole lot of the innovative from God. This is the very dynamic that we have on display with this discourse with Nicodemus and Jesus. It starts out so positively: I see the positive things that you do, the power you possess. Surely you must be of God and from God to do what we have heard and seen you do. But Nicodemus'

identification of Jesus struggles and fails when presented with that which the teacher of the way was trying to teach him. Nicodemus is a serious man on a serious mission. He is trying to understand—really he is. He is intrigued by the possibilities of what Jesus displays but cannot wrap his head around the world that Jesus was offering and the challenges it involves. His status of a teacher of Israel complicates his questions, bringing him in the night to learn and to question (what, after all, if he happens to be wrong and lose the authority that he has). He deserves full credit for trying to do the difficult work of squaring that which he KNOWS with that which he perceives. It is his sense of the impossible that trips him up on words like “being born from above” and being born of water and Spirit. The insistence of what is possible disconnects him from the broader notion of what Jesus was saying. We who have had 20 centuries to consider and frame Jesus’ metaphors have the advantage: we can interpret that which we understand Jesus to be on about as opposed to Nicodemus’ seeming density.

Yet it is Nicodemus, I think, that serves not as a cautionary tale about the propensity to over think things (not that this would be particularly bad—it is a sermon that I could stand to hear in any case). Rather I think him a stand in for a treatise on the nature and the demands of the kingdom. Within ancient literature, if you wanted to speak of mystery and that which was out of control and unknowable you spoke of water and of wind: the forces that were ever present yet possible to contain or to understand—something you want to put a deity in charge of to at least have someone to appeal to if things were going amuck. It is precisely these elements and the most wonderous occurrence of that world and this—birth itself—that Jesus likens the working of the Spirit to. Jesus is saying that the impossible things of this world stand as a possibility with God, and that the Kingdom will be the realm of the impossible if and only if we allow God to shape us and birth us as God sees fit. What a challenging thing, then and now: we know what to do with rules. We haven’t the slightest idea of what to do with a God who speaks beyond the rules and calls us to change. We must be born again—shaped again, shaved and nipped time and again in order to have the kingdom come in us and through us even in the most unlikely way.

With this in mind is there little wonder that we reduce the concept of being born again to a particular prayer at a particular time? As critically important as this is, we make a singular event out of the process of God breaking in and moving in our midst, even at times and in ways that we would rather laugh off than take seriously. We kept it close and personal because it is a behavior that we can control and does not ask all that much of us except to invite Jesus to come.

But Jesus wants to come to befriend us, yes, always; but even more so to change us, move us and turn our lives upside down if we let him. It is said that God often tries to get our attention by throwing pebbles at our window like a star-crossed lover, rousing us to attention. God in Jesus is done using pebbles. Jesus is tossing bricks here that shatter Nicodemus' world, and nothing will ever be the same. In this conversation is Jesus breaking into his world and re-organizing it in a way that cannot be ignored. It can't be planned. It can't be articulated or penciled in on the calendar. It can't be achieved by the disciplines of higher awareness. It can only be opened to and accomplished by the working of the Spirit. But it is a model for all that happens when God comes with uncontrollable power, and births us again.

I am guessing that many of us have stories of being birthed again, of having our minds changed and our worlds shaken. One of my re-birth stories will always be going on Goshen College's Study Service Term to China. I chose China over Latin America because I wanted to encounter something that would be completely and utterly different than anything that I had known before. Going to a location where the program had run for decades and where there is a thriving North American tourist trade was not of interest to me. That and I was a college sophomore, so was full of the certainty of the young and ambitious. I got what I signed up for: a whole other experience of the world and of thinking that left me changed. It taught me much more about Michael Jackson than I ever wanted to know (as a conversational English teacher you need to talk about what your students were interested in and at that time that was primarily the King of Pop). It taught me some things of how a very different society and way of thinking constructed itself and thinks about the world. Most of all, it allowed me to think about my life, my way of being, and my faith with new eyes. It reconfigured my plans for a somewhat straight forward corporate career path to the one that led me where I least expected. I could not be more thankful.

Time and again regardless of our stage of faith we are offered rebirth. We are offered change in God's hands and through God's work if we can allow it to be. It is not something often that we do of our own efforts, but by entertaining the impossibilities of faith and change that the Spirit can place before us all the time. It can be being invited to risk engaging when we would rather not. It can be challenging the natural and understandable fear that rises in us unbidden and unaware to entertain the new. It can be something as simple as taking up something new purposefully in the name of Christ in your life, or laying something aside that

you can release to allow God to fill you with that which we don't always expect. God is in the birthing, shaping business if we allow it to happen, when we imagine ever so shortly or ever so naively that the world can still change, and we ourselves in it. It might be that which we find laughable, that which we least expect and long suspect is not likely. We might even be inclined to laugh off the impossibility of change in the likes of even us.

But inside every joke dwells both impossibility and possibility. A duck walking into a bar is funny because Ducks generally don't walk into any establishment but if they did, it would make for some funny looks and reactions. You are holding the two together and it is that interplay that makes the funny and brings the life from the notion. Perhaps we are best thinking about new birth—the full new birth of our minds and souls in such a way: we wonder at the impossibility of it all, but we are intrigued by the what if all the same. It is this spark of maybe that give it life, brings it hope, and allows the Spirit to work in its unpredictable and uncontrollable ways, shaping us all.

Where might we see God at work in us? Alongside us? Bringing the kingdom into the world who he loves and the souls of those we he fully loves? What might seem impossible for us, but remains in the ever possible realm of God's good work? Our personal healing? The change of the broken relationship? The enlivening energy of the Spirit where it is least expected?

God us re-birthing us all and the world along side. Might we be given the boldness to be changed and join in God's good work even now. Amen.