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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia  
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 Texts: John 3:1-21, Isaiah 46:3-4

## Nicodemus

### *Introduction to Scripture*

This morning we continue our reading in the Gospel of John. This gospel is rife with symbolism, metaphor, irony, and wordplay. As I noted a couple of weeks ago, one scholar calls it “theological reflection in the form of a story.” Today we are introduced to one of the Fourth Gospel’s favorite patterns of storytelling, namely, a story that begins with a dialogue between Jesus and someone (in this case Nicodemus), which leads to a misunderstanding on the part of Jesus’ conversation partner, which then leads to a monologue by Jesus. Today’s story contains three double entendres that get lost in translation, viz. born *anōthen* which can mean either born again or born from above, *pneuma* which can mean either wind or spirit or breath, and *hypsōo* which can mean lifted up physically (as Jesus on the cross) or lifted up in an exalted way. Listen now for God’s word: *John 3:1-21*.

### *Sermon*

“Born-again” is a label whose popularity was born some fifty years ago. It denotes an altar-call decision for Christ and even is now an apparently a common marketing strategy as in Born Again Landscaping and Construction in Grove City, Ohio, Born Again Home Furnishings in Whitwell, Tennessee, and Born Again Clock Repair in Dodge County, Minnesota, to cite but a few. What a shame that this rich metaphor Jesus employed with Nicodemus has gotten shrunk down and flattened out to a one-time experience of *deciding* to accept Christ (not to mention an advertising slogan). So, this sermon will be a rescue attempt to reclaim the full-bodied, colorful figure of speech Jesus uses. It’s not to say that there is no place for rational decisions to commit ourselves to Christ, but *birth* is hardly the metaphor for it.

After all, who *decides* to get born?

Nobody.

Birth is something you have nothing to do with when you are the child. You don’t ask to get born; you just are because someone (or someones) greater than you made it happen. It’s something you have no control over. It’s a process initiated by a power beyond you.

Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus, the teacher of the law who has come to visit him by night, compares seeing and entering the kingdom of God to birth. Before we get to the birth part, let’s look for a minute about what he means by the kingdom of God. This is a phrase that’s all over the other three gospels, the Synoptics. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus only utters it twice, both times in this story. What he usually talks about—and talks about quite a lot—is eternal life, which is just another way of saying the same thing, but with a different accent. Living in the kingdom of God or experiencing eternal life (as it’s portrayed in the Fourth Gospel) is a foretaste of heaven, of knowing God and living in God’s unending presence, experiencing a quality of life which is abundant, new, transformed by the reign of God. It’s

trusting Jesus and walking in his light. It's life that's truly life. It's everlasting but it begins now. You don't have to wait until you die.

Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. . . . You must be born from above." Jesus' metaphor for this kingdom living is birth. It's birth that comes from above, i.e. from God. It is the work of the Spirit. It is a divine gift.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus wants to know, echoing the barren Sarah and the Virgin Mary before him, when there was talk of birth. That's, by the way, the last we hear from Nicodemus in this story

Well, there's a certain mystery to this God-given birth into the kingdom, Nicodemus, because the Spirit is about as controllable as the wind. Like the wind, it's also powerful. When the Spirit of God shows up, things come to life. In Genesis 1:1, in the beginning, it's the wind or Spirit of God that sweeps over the face of the deep and sets creation into motion. After God fashions the first human from the dust, it is the breath or Spirit of God breathed into Adam which makes him a living being. In the valley of dry bones, it is the Spirit come from the four winds blown upon the slain which puts sinews and flesh and skin upon them and breath in them, and they stand up alive. When the Spirit of God shows up, there's new life. But it's not something that anyone but God decides or commands. Nor is it visible. "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 born of the Spirit," Jesus says.

So, forget trying to control being born from above. Nicodemus, all your certitude, all your "we knows" are out the window. There's a marvelous mystery at work here. Being born from above by the sovereign, untamed Spirit of God is a life-giving gift. And just like physical birth it's also risky and amazing and frightening and miraculous. In the womb it's cozy and warm. Our every need is met. We are protected. With birth we are thrust into the world. The safety of the womb is gone, and we are cast into a bright and uncertain place. Will there be someone to feed us when we are hungry, change us when we are wet, swaddle us when we are cold? Being born is a vulnerable process. And yet, it opens us to beauty and wonder as well as fear and pain, to love and goodness as well as hurt and sadness. We can see color, hear music, taste our mother's milk. It gives us life in a way we could never know it if we stayed in the womb.

When we are born from above by the Spirit, we find ourselves living and breathing in an exciting and wonderful and sometimes painful existence. This kingdom living, this eternal life, what we might call our journey of faith, while amazing, is not always easy. The community from which John's Gospel springs was certainly enduring strife. You see a lot of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities in this gospel that reflects family fights, so to speak. Apparently, John's church had been expelled from the synagogue. So, buckle your seatbelt when you leave the womb and enter the kingdom. Belonging to the Christian community and following Jesus, beginning with your baptism (as you were "born by water and Spirit"), will probably not be a smooth ride.

As I mentioned earlier, there's a wordplay in the Greek. Jesus speaks of being born "from above," but his words also can be rendered as "born again." Too bad Bible translators have to pick one or the other. My friend and Presbyterian colleague Larry Owens tells about waiting in a long line in the Post Office one day. An elderly lady, clutching her purse in one hand and a fistful of tracts in the other, was making her way down the line. She queried each person, "Are you born again?" Some answered yes and gave a time and place. To those who

answered no, she handed a pamphlet and moved on. When she got to Larry, she asked, “Are you born again?” “Oh yes. I’ve been born again, and again, and again. Every day I’m born again.” “Hmmp,” she replied, and moved on. I think Larry’s right. We do experience this spiritual birth again and again. It’s a lifelong process.

Well, I’ve talked a lot about the birthee, but what about the one giving birth?

I took Anna and Xan to see the 2006 film, “The Nativity Story” at Christmastime. They were five and nine. As PKs,<sup>i</sup> they knew the Nativity Story backwards and forwards. Ho hum. What interested them in the movie were the birth scenes, of which there were two: Elizabeth giving birth to John the Baptist and Mary giving birth to Jesus. While not overly graphic, there was a lot of screaming and huffing and puffing, so much so that Anna, the five year old, declared afterwards, “I’m never having a baby!” Xan, who was better educated in these matters than I realized, noted, however, that the scenes weren’t totally realistic since the newborn babies were missing their “extension cords.”

Yes, birth for the mother is painful and unnerving to witness. And in real life it does involve blood, sweat and tears, plus water, placenta, panting, pushing, hollering, and yes, an umbilical cord.

I have only seen two births. The first was as a teenager when our dog gave birth to a litter of puppies. She was having a difficult time, so we took her to the vet. When he deployed the forceps to help her along, I fainted. The other time was when I gave birth to Xan. Not only did I see it, I felt it! And I felt it a lot longer than I intended since the administration of the second epidural spinal block (since the first had missed its mark) was long after the labor-inducing drug had kicked in big time. Of course, the child I birthed (like every child) is so precious; I’d do it all again

For the mother, birth is messy and amazing and painful and miraculous. As children of God, born, as the Fourth Gospel says in the opening chapter, “not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God,”<sup>ii</sup> we have to be grateful to our laboring Mother. (That’s Mother with a capital M). Jesus, especially in the Fourth Gospel, is fond of speaking of God as Father, but with this birth metaphor, God is clearly Mother, the Mother who suffers on behalf of the child to give the child life.

Isaiah employed the same image: God as bearing us and bearing with us. “Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb... I have made, and I will bear, I will carry and I will save.”<sup>iii</sup> Repeatedly the Old Testament refers to God’s compassion. The Hebrew word that gets translated as “compassionate” or “merciful” is related to the word for womb. The Lord is kind, gracious, nurturing, giving, forgiving, lifegiving, suffering, and longsuffering—all in a maternal, womblike way. We are born from above thanks to our laboring, loving God.

So, what happened to Nicodemus after his after-dark call on Jesus? The Fourth Gospel gives us some hints, I think, that Nicodemus took what Jesus said to heart. He appears twice more in the gospel. In each instance, there’s evidence that his birth from above by the Spirit was reshaping his life. In the first instance,<sup>iv</sup> Nicodemus comes to Jesus’ defense among his fellow Pharisees. They are arguing for Jesus’ arrest but Nicodemus cautions that their law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing. His peers scoff at his sympathy for Jesus. While his nighttime visit might have shown his fear and hesitancy to be seen with Jesus, Nicodemus has definitely grown more courageous. In the second instance,<sup>v</sup> Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea remove Jesus’ body from the cross, wrap it with spices in linen cloths, and lay it in a tomb. If that’s not a gift of devotion, I don’t know what is. Oh, and Nicodemus

brought the spices—a hundred pounds of them. It sounds to me like the Spirit has been laboring in love for Nicodemus, transforming more and more his fledgling trust in the One who was birthing him into new life.

And I'm here to tell you that the Spirit labors in love for you, too, giving you the gift of eternal life, life in the kingdom of God. Birth—with all its messiness, vulnerability, and wonder—is a marvelous image to capture this process. Every day, you are born again, from above, by the grace of God. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>i</sup> Preacher's Kids

<sup>ii</sup> John 1:13

<sup>iii</sup> Isaiah 46:3-4

<sup>iv</sup> John 7:45-52

<sup>v</sup> John 19:38-42