

Sermon – May 30, 2021
“Born of the Spirit”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 3:1-17

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, blow like a transforming wind into our hearts. Come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Let them be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Good morning. I want to thank Carol for playing taps this morning. I also want to encourage us each to take a moment tomorrow, whenever it works for us in our busy day, to give thanks for those who gave all for this country.

I would like to provide some background to this morning's scripture to help us have a context for what we have heard. The scripture just before this morning's reading at the end of chapter two reads, "When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone." The Greek provides an interesting connection between these verses and today's scripture that many of our translations obscure. The Greek makes clear a connection between the men to whom Jesus will not entrust himself in chapter two and the man Nicodemus who comes to see Jesus. Nicodemus represents one of the men who believed in Jesus because of the signs and has come as their representative seeking something more from Jesus.

Sometimes when I am asked which New Testament person I connect with, Nicodemus comes to my mind as I see some similarities in his path to Jesus and mine. He is older, a

Pharisee, one who knows the Law and seeks to live it out in his life. He is a leader of the Jews, most likely a member of the Sanhedrin, a ruler in Israel. He has seen the signs Jesus has done at the Passover and knows that only if Jesus is from God can he do such signs. Nicodemus also has fear and a lack of courage to openly come to Jesus and openly be known as one who follows Jesus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. And I should point out that in the Gospel of John, the only other person who comes to Jesus at night is Judas. In John's Gospel, night represents evil. Nicodemus comes out of the darkness of night to Jesus, the light. We should also note that Nicodemus calls Jesus rabbi, or teacher. Nicodemus' use of this title marks him as a follower of Jesus. It is the same title his disciples use for Jesus in John's Gospel. There is a lot about Nicodemus that I connect to as he, like myself, seeks to come to Jesus.

Nicodemus may have come seeking to have a theological discussion with Jesus about how Jesus can perform signs that only God can perform. Jesus will have none of that sort of banter; instead, three times in this discussion, Jesus shares key revelations about himself as the Son of God. In the scripture, these revelations are all marked with "Amen" or "Very truly" or "I tell you truly" statements, depending on our translation. This morning we will focus on two of these revelations.

Jesus' reply to Nicodemus' statement that Jesus must have come from God is the first revelation. Jesus does not respond to Nicodemus' comment about his being from God, but moves the conversation to what is required for one to enter the kingdom of God, being born from above. Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Jesus' response is outside of the existing Jewish concept of how one might enter the kingdom of God, that is, through obedience to the Law. Nicodemus is confused and asks Jesus about the physical or fleshly impossibility of such birth. He asks in the context of re-entry into a mother's womb, something Nicodemus sees as impossible. Jesus does not explain his words but gives us another revelation with his answer. Jesus changes the being born from above in his first response to being born of water and Spirit. Jesus does not address the water aspect of this statement but does share a short parable about the Spirit after making the point that something more than an understanding of God working through Jesus is needed for one to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus' statement that the flesh is flesh carries with it the idea that the flesh is passing and what comes from flesh is temporary. Flesh produces flesh that passes away. Nicodemus' question about a mother's womb stresses that he is thinking about flesh and not

Spirit. Jesus' revelation about the Spirit tells us that what is born or comes from the Spirit is lasting and does not end, as it is connected to the everlasting kingdom of God. Rebirth, or birth in the Spirit, brings life, everlasting life. These are difficult words for Nicodemus to understand and they are difficult for us today as well. We also, like Nicodemus, wonder about getting into the kingdom of God. We also struggle to understand what it means to be reborn in water and Spirit, and, like Nicodemus, need to encounter a transforming power to enable us to understand and be reborn as spiritual people. We need this Spirit experience that Jesus speaks to in our lives. Jesus then compares the Spirit to the wind in a short parable. He tells Nicodemus that the wind blows where it chooses, and we hear the sound of it, but we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. Those who are born of the Spirit have experienced the Spirit in such a manner as the wind. They do not know where the Spirit came from or where he went, but they can feel the transformative effects of him in their lives as they encounter the Spirit and are reborn into someone new. Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel and does not understand what Jesus speaks of when he talks about the Spirit. Nicodemus, like us, needs help to allow him to experience the Holy Spirit. He needs to be born from above as do we all. He needs to experience the fire of the Holy Spirit that burns away the old self and creates the new spiritual self from the inside out. Nicodemus came out of the darkness to talk with Jesus seeking help to understand spiritual things, and Jesus sees in him one who needs to encounter the Holy Spirit and be reborn. Jesus sees us today as well and his answer for our questions is also spiritual rebirth. We also ask, "What can we do to make this same journey from the dark to the light, from outside the kingdom to into God's kingdom, from those of the flesh to those of the Spirit born from above? How do we experience the Holy Spirit? What can we do to grow in our connection to the presence of Jesus?"

It is through our rebirth in the Spirit that we establish this connection. Our desire is to begin to connect in a stronger and deeper manner to Jesus, to come to him out of darkness, to tap into the power he is giving us from heaven through the Holy Spirit, not for our own use but to be used by Jesus to bring about the kingdom of God. Our desire is to grow and mature into Jesus' image as we set aside the flesh and are reborn in the Spirit.

How do we do this? How do we learn to connect to a resurrected Lord in heaven through the Holy Spirit? How do we prepare to encounter the Spirit that blows where it chooses? How do our hearts become open as were Jesus' disciples at Pentecost that we might not only hear the

sound of a mighty rushing wind, but be those who are filled with the refining fire of the Holy Spirit? I am glad we are asking these questions. John Wesley, after his Aldersgate experience with the Spirit, also sought to help others become open to the blowing of the Spirit in their lives and sought to help those who come out of the darkness to follow Jesus, connect to Jesus' presence, and claim the inheritance of one seated in heaven with Jesus. Wesley came up with five methods to help develop our connection to Christ, methods he called "means of grace." The five are prayer, searching the scriptures, attendance at the Lord's Supper, fasting, and Christian conferencing. These are five practices we should learn and use to help us to connect to Jesus' presence. They are essentially divinely appointed places of waiting. They are all practices that Jesus demonstrated in his life. Let's look at them briefly this morning.

Prayer is talking with God and listening to His reply. Prayer is taking what is on our hearts and turning it into a conversation with Jesus, and as we do, we build a deeper relationship with Jesus. There are many great resources on how to pray, and we can always follow the example that Jesus taught his disciples, the Lord's Prayer, either as our prayer itself or as a form to guide our prayers. The key to prayer is to invest time in meeting with Jesus and talking to him about what is on our hearts. Prayer enables us to develop a deeper relationship with Jesus.

The next means of grace is searching the scriptures. We are to be disciples who are regularly reading the Bible and not just reading it and setting our copy of the scriptures down, but studying and meditating upon what we find. But searching the scriptures from our comfortable home with a cup of coffee in our hand is not all that Wesley had in mind. For John Wesley, searching the scriptures included putting what we find into practice in our lives, seeking to discover who Jesus is and to live like him in the world where we are sent. Searching the scriptures also includes hearing the word proclaimed or preached. This means going to a worship service where the word of God is read and proclaimed as well as using all of the media sources we have been blessed with to hear others proclaim God's word. Finally, we are also to be part of studies where the word of God is taught. We are to come together so the Holy Spirit can connect us to Jesus' presence and let the Spirit guide us through God's word. Our goal is not to become biblical scholars but to search the scriptures seeking to find what they tell us about Jesus and then ordering our lives in that manner in the world. We are to be lights on a hilltop and the hands and feet of Jesus in his mission to the nations.

The next means of grace is attendance at the Lord's Supper. This is Communion. Attendance is not sitting in the back of the church while Communion is happening, but joining in the service in a manner that allows us to remember what Jesus has done and what he has commanded us to do: love one another. Wesley encouraged the early Methodists to attend the Lord's Supper as often as possible, weekly or daily was preferable. As Christ's presence was made known to the Emmaus travelers in the breaking of the bread, so also Christ's presence is made known to us through the breaking of the bread. We can grow in our connection to the presence of Christ by seeking to commune at his table as often as possible.

Next is my least favorite means of grace, fasting, or the denial of self to focus on God. Now I ask that you not judge me. I am just confessing that I struggle with this means of grace. Fasting is normally abstaining from food. Wesley's fasting technique was to eat nothing after dinner and then not to eat the next day until 3 or 4 in the afternoon, tea time. If people have health issues that abstinence from food might impact, they are to pick out something else for a time of denial and focusing on God. The key is setting aside something we like and to feast instead on God. Just not eating is not fasting. Not eating brings the physical need to mind; fasting is bringing God into the middle of that need. Setting aside food for a time brings physical responses in our bodies that we are to let remind us of God and what He has done for us. Fasting is a means of grace that is found in the scripture as something that Jesus expects his followers to do once he has ascended to heaven. Jesus has ascended to heaven, so it is time for us to fast. I should note that fasting is commanded by Jesus for his followers. In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus' words to his followers are "when you fast," not if we decide to fast. When we decide to try this means of grace, I recommend we seek guidance from those who have practiced fasting and left helpful instruction.

The last means of grace is Christian conferencing, or gathering together in small groups. Christian conferencing is not Bible study, choir practice, a UMW bake sale or a UM Men's breakfast. Christian conferencing is a small group of people who have committed to meet together in love and are willing to set aside the time necessary to develop relationships and learn to trust each other to the point that they can be real with each other, listen to one another in the Spirit, pray with each other, and hold each other accountable in the love of Jesus. This is where people love each other and invite the Holy Spirit into the middle of that love. This is where rebirth happens, where lives are transformed, the Spirit is invited, the wind blows and we don't

feel it on our faces but in our souls. John Wesley, from his experience in and with small groups, developed five questions for each person to share their answers within the group weekly. Those questions are “How is it with your soul? What are your struggles and successes? What might the scriptures and Spirit be speaking in your life? What sins do you have to confess?” and “What secrets do you have?” You see, we can hide what is going on in our hearts in a choir practice, Bible study or Sunday School class, but if we are with several others who are going to ask us these questions and receive our answers with the love of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, we come to a place where we don’t want to hide. We have come to a place and time when we want to be real, to open up our hearts, and we share who we are deep inside our souls. As we develop relationships in love, it is through these loving group members that we find healing, restoration, and a growing closeness in the Spirit to the presence of Jesus. This is not a group where our actions and brokenness are condemned, but a place where we are listened to in the Holy Spirit, prayed over in love, and forgiven in the name of Jesus Christ. These small groups are a place where the love of Christ is extended to us from others who also sit with Jesus in heaven. Let me encourage us to dare to get started and to leap into these means of grace. Start to pray and when we miss a day accept grace and start again. Search the scriptures and find where the Holy Spirit is leading us to go and live out what we find and if we miss a day or days, accept grace and start again. Seek every opportunity available to us to commune with Jesus at his table. Try times of fasting, and here I again recommend that we seek a guide to help us with this spiritual discipline. And finally, look around at those with whom we worship and form a band of three to four people of the same sex and begin to develop loving relationships as we seek to help each other grow through the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ. Our goal is to grow in our connection to Christ and to be transformed by the blowing of the Spirit into our hearts through these means of grace.

Pray with me: Jesus, we long to come and be present with you in heaven. Lord, send the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us that we might be those who are reborn from above and are with you in the kingdom of God. Give us the courage to leap into new means of grace that we might grow in our connection to you. Lord, bring us out of darkness and into your light. Let us become those who are filled with the Spirit as it blows through our lives. Amen