

## Born Again

*John3:1-12 ~ January 8, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

***“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”***

Today I am going to ask for your indulgence as I share with you a lengthy quotation from a letter that my mother wrote to her mother on November 10, 1953 from Seward, Alaska. Seward had the nearest hospital to where my parents were living, at the time, in Hope, Alaska, about seventy miles away. The letter reads as follows:

*Dear Mother (and brand new grandmother),*

*It's about time I got around to writing you to tell you about the big event. The telegram Harold sent to you had the important facts. But I am sure you are eager to hear the details.*

*About 12:30 we decided to go to the hospital. The nurse checked me in, did the usual preparation, and then allowed Harold to come down to my room to wait. My contractions were getting more frequent and of longer duration very rapidly, so we both thought we'd get this project over soon. Harold sat with his watch in hand. We laughed about his coaching instinct--timing the "human" race--and said he should have a stopwatch for greater accuracy.*

*What folly, because about then something happened. I hadn't had a drug or anything but my contractions slowed down and I had to start practically all over again. I thought back to the concern of the women in Hope about getting me into Seward ahead of time. I believe I could have crawled in on hands and knees from Hope and made it in plenty of time. Anyway, the nurses took me into the delivery room around 3:00pm. Harold stayed in there with me almost to the end. This intrigued the hospital staff because most husbands stayed away or sat reading magazines in the waiting room as so often depicted in movies.*

*I was very tired by the time the baby got here, but was conscious the whole time. When it dragged out so long at the end, I was given a little bit of something, I think, but it didn't put me out. So I was on hand to thrill at the lusty squall of Thomas Hayes when he arrived on the scene at 6:30pm.*

Most of you have correctly guessed that this is a firsthand account of my own birth. I personally remember nothing of it, but feel fortunate to have this story as part of my heritage. I always think of this account when Nicodemus expressed his incredulity at Jesus teaching.

***“How can someone be born when they are old? ... Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”***

In his own way Nicodemus was trying to make sense out of Jesus words.

***“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”***

"Born again," that seems like such an easy thing to say. It has rung like a bell down through Christian history. We know it is vitally important to the Christian faith. But what does it mean. How does it relate to physical birth? For me, I have to wonder how “born again” relates to the story my mother told my Grandmother so many years ago. I was born in Seward, Alaska in 1953. There is a true story about my birth. But Jesus says that I must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God. I find myself standing alongside Nicodemus trying to make sense out of this. Clearly, in the story of my birth I am a central player, but I had almost nothing to do with it. I was the object of the event, so it all happened to me.

But when Nicodemus hears Jesus words, he assumes that Jesus is telling him to do something. Like the true Pharisee that he is, Nicodemus sees his relationship to God as seeking righteousness by how he lives. How else can he interpret Jesus words other than a demand for him to do something? But the only thing that occurs to him is impossible. He cannot enter again into his mother's womb to gain second birth.

***Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.***

Here Jesus tips his hand so that we can all see what he is talking about. Jesus says, ... "born of water and the Spirit." This is about as plain as he can make it. Jesus is talking about Christian Baptism. When a Christian is baptized they receive the Holy Spirit and are born again. Nicodemus would have known right away what Jesus was talking about because he had been witness to the work of John the Baptist. This was the entire reason that Jesus went to be baptized by John. You remember the story. When Jesus

came up out of the water the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended in a dovelike fashion, and God the Father declared, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." It was in that moment that the possibility for becoming born again through Baptism became a reality.

John the Baptist declares, ***"I baptize you with water ... But after me comes one who ... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit..."*** Jesus says to Nicodemus, ***"no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."*** Do you see the connection? And it also connects to the great commandment Jesus gives as he ascends into heaven... ***"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."***

Baptism is what Jesus means when he talks about being born again. This must have flabbergasted Nicodemus. Baptism is not something we do. Baptism is something, like birth itself, that is done to us. Baptism was about repentance for sin, not about keeping the law. To be baptized meant that you were a failure as a Pharisee. In fact baptism meant admitting the failure of the whole legalistic system of works righteousness. That was the nature of baptism itself. It declared human righteousness null and void. Baptism meant a kind of death to human striving before God which is the natural outcome of our first birth.

Another famous Pharisee, St. Paul, describes the nature of baptism this way.

***Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.***

Baptism connects us to Jesus and his death on the cross. In so doing it also connects us to the forgiveness of sins. But Baptism is more than this. It also connects us to the new life brought through resurrection. This is the life that Jesus is talking about with Nicodemus. It is the new life that comes to those who are born again. It is a life that is lived in the Holy Spirit who comes to us in Baptism.

You have heard the story of my first birth, now I will tell you the story of how I was born again. Late in the fall of 1969, at Sandpoint United Methodist Church in Sandpoint Idaho, a pastor took a little water and put it on my head and said in the ancient formula of the Christian Church, ***"I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son, and the***

**Holy Spirit.**" I was born again. I was 16 years old, but I brought nothing to the event. Like my first birth everything that needed to be done was done by others. And the most important agent of all was God himself who granted me the gift of the Holy Spirit for the living of each day of life. It came to pass just as God had designed it for me. Could it have been different? Yes, but it wasn't. In baptism, whenever it happens, however it happens, God grants his gracious gift of rebirth. We become born again. All of us. Our whole life from beginning to end becomes spiritually born again. As Jesus promises, **"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."**

But what does this mean? It is a question that must be answered. It is the central point of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. This is about the Kingdom of God. Jesus says that to SEE the kingdom of God we must be born again. Then Jesus says we cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless we are born of water and the spirit. What is it that Baptism does for you? It makes you a citizen of the Kingdom of God. Think about that. You are a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

How many thought baptism is what saves you? That is not actually true. It is Jesus that saves you. Baptism is his way of making you a citizen in his Kingdom.

How many of you thought that baptism was the way you get to heaven? Again that is not quite the way it happens. Even though baptism is necessary because Jesus commands it, we know that it is Jesus and our faith in him that brings us into eternal life. Baptism is primarily an earthly thing. It is for this life. Baptism is our passport that declares us citizens of the Kingdom of God. It demonstrates that we belong to Jesus. It is our spiritual citizenship.

Your citizenship in the Kingdom of God is real. It is real right now. It has meaning for every day of your lives. This morning when you woke up you were a citizen of the United States. For most of us that is a product of our first birth. But as baptized Christians you also woke up as a citizen of the Kingdom of God. And the purposes and business of God's kingdom is vital to your daily life. When you rise from your bed, God's Holy Spirit is with you. He will work to guide your life throughout the day. That is what it means to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. When you walk out your door you walk into a foreign country called the World. God's kingdom is at war with the world, so life in the world, but not of the world, can be complicated. Again God's Spirit walks with you, helping you to find a way through the struggles of life in this world. And you carry

your baptism with you as a passport. It identifies your true citizenship. It shows that your spiritual birth makes you a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

The key to life as citizens in the Kingdom of God is to learn the skill of walking by the Spirit. You are called by God to put your faith in him and turn over the direction of your life to the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit's guidance, life in the world takes on meaning toward the greater purpose of the kingdom of God. And tonight when you lie down to sleep you can trust God's Holy Spirit to watch over you and to prepare you for the next day you will live in the Kingdom of God. You are baptized. You are born again.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.