

Sermon for Sunday, March 8, 2020 - "Born of God"

Second Sunday in Lent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Hasn't the sunshine recently been wonderful? It's such a balm to the soul to have brighter days, longer days, warmer days. I would like to put out that we've been enjoying bright days even before daylight saving time began, but that's beside the point.

I love getting out in the bright sunlight to walk the dogs with my spouse Matt. I want to soak up all the natural vitamin D I can. It's fun to run into neighbors and friends after we've all been cooped up inside. Judging by the foot traffic near my house this week, I'm not alone.

Yet being out when the sun is shining, especially in the summer, also makes you more visible and exposed. You should protect against UV rays with hats, sunglasses and sunblock. Also, people will see you, so maybe you don't want to wear a ratty t-shirt and sweatpants. If you're walking at, say, 10:00 a.m. on a weekday, people may wonder why you're not at work or being more productive then. There's a good chance someone will want to stop and chat and maybe you're just not feeling social.

When you walk at night, in the dark, it can feel cozier, quieter, easier to walk without interruption. You're a little less conspicuous, a little more sheltered.

Nicodemus seeks Jesus under cover of darkness, in the night. He's interested in Jesus and wants to learn more. Yet, it seems he wants to keep his interaction with Jesus secret, hidden, private. He sees something intriguing in Jesus, but he doesn't want to go public with it. Maybe Nicodemus is concerned about his own position and security. Jesus *is* upsetting the powers that be. Whatever the reason, Nicodemus doesn't want to be exposed as he seeks Jesus out. He isn't ready to follow Jesus in the full light of day. He needs some information, some answers, first. Seems reasonable. But Jesus, in typical Jesus fashion, refuses to give Nicodemus a straight answer about who he is and what he does. Instead, he tells Nicodemus that he must be born from above, that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. That seems a little extreme.

Nicodemus is just gathering information and Jesus tells him he needs to be born from above. The word translated here as *above* can also be translated as *again* or *anew*. So, Jesus is saying Nicodemus needs to be born from above or born anew or born again or all three. No matter how you translate it, it's an intense metaphor. Being born involves change, disruption, transformation. It involves being pushed out of a dark, cozy womb into a much larger, riskier, and yet more bright, beautiful world.

Nicodemus totally misses that Jesus is using a metaphor. He interprets Jesus' words literally, asking, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the moth-

er's womb and be born?" Jesus has offered Nicodemus a metaphor to transform his imagination and his relationship with God, but Nicodemus gets hung up on the literal and totally misses the point. As he does, he makes it clear that Jesus is right. Nicodemus does need to be born anew but, it seems, Nicodemus doesn't particularly want this to happen.

He wants to stay hidden in a safe, dark place. He wants to be fed with simple, direct answers. Nicodemus wants to remain comfortable in womb-like protective darkness and simplicity. But Jesus wants Nicodemus to live with God in the full light of day. He wants Nicodemus to move beyond absorbing simple answers and into full participation in the kingdom of God. Jesus wants Nicodemus to be born anew. He wants the same thing for us. Jesus wants us to be born again into full participation in God's kingdom of love, mercy and justice. God wants to push us out of our comfort zones into being more visible followers of the way of Jesus.

Certainly, there are times when we need comfort and nurture, times when we need to be sheltered like a child growing in the womb. The Hebrew word for womb is also the biblical word used to describe God's compassion. The Bible shows us our need for quiet, simple growth in the womb of God's compassion. Yet, the Bible also gives us images of God laboring to give birth to God's people, God laboring to push us into the fullness of who we have been created to be. God wants us to be born anew.

So how does this happen for us? These days, Christians struggle with this metaphor and its implications. People speak of being born again as if it's something we do, as if we are in control - thinking that if we say the right things, do the right things, make a decision for Jesus, believe the right doctrine or get baptized the right way, *then* we will be born again. By implication, those who don't do those things can't be born again.

The thing we seem to forget is that the one being born has very little to do with the whole birth process. The work of birth is done by the one who is giving birth! (As many of us know first hand!) So, being born anew depends upon God, not upon us. It is the work of the Spirit - the Spirit, like the wind, blows where it chooses. We have very little control over the process of our being born anew.

That's a little unsettling and uncomfortable. Like Nicodemus, we'd probably prefer more direct answers, clear steps outlining what to expect in our life with God. We do get some assurances and some promises. We are assured, in the witness of scripture, that God has chosen to pour out the Spirit upon the church. We're promised that we are each given the Spirit and a new birth in baptism.

But, that is just the beginning of a lifelong process of ongoing renewal and rebirth. The Spirit doesn't give us new birth once and then leave us be. We are reborn over and over. We are born again when we are convicted of our sin and yet assured that we have new life in Christ. We are born again through the very body and blood of Jesus. We are born again when life events disturb us, but still God brings new life out of them as God promises to do.

The Spirit continues to nurture us and push us out of our cozy, comfort zones and into a larger, riskier and yet more bright and beautiful world. In this larger work we are not safe. We come up against the powers that be, the powers that oppose God's new kingdom and God's passionate love for the whole world. We come up against sin and hatred and death. Yet in the face of all this, the Spirit gives us new birth, new life, again and again. The Spirit gives us what we need to live as participants in God's kingdom of love, mercy and justice.

This is what happened for Nicodemus. Later in the Gospel of John we see that the Spirit pushed him to speak up for Jesus in a heated conversation between the temple police and other Pharisees. Then after Jesus' death, the Spirit pushed Nicodemus to anoint Jesus' body with oil at great risk to himself.

The Spirit birthed Nicodemus into new life.

The Spirit does the same for us.

We are reborn today.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.