

"The Good News of God's Love"
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – March 5, 2023

Please Read:
Psalm 121
John 3:1-17

Rolf Jacobson wrote a recent article entitled “Rethinking the ‘Lenten Journey.’”¹ He laments the well-worn metaphor of Lent as *journey*. It’s not a journey for most of us, because “we’re not going anywhere – either figuratively or metaphorically,” he contends. I tend to agree that most of us don’t need more marching orders or another guide to how to get somewhere with more fasting, praying...or more of anything to do, really.

Don’t get me wrong. I love goals and focus and all of the spiritual disciplines that traditionally go along with Lent. I saw an interview with Olympic gold star medalist Michael Phelps where he acknowledged he did his swimming training every single day for five years: 1,825 consecutive days. No breaks. Indeed, that’s how a *great* swimmer got to be the world’s *best* Olympic swimmer ever. Phelps puts it like this, “If you want to be the best, you have to do things that other people aren’t willing to do.”²... But what I want to suggest to you today is that if we are truly to experience Lent as a time of deep spiritual *renewal* and a source of *new* life, then just trying harder is not going to cut it, at least for me. There’s got to be another way... And so I invite you to rethink what we’re really supposed to be “doing” and where we really can “go” for new life this Lent.

Today’s gospel text is one of the most famous encounters with Jesus. Late one night a man came to Jesus. Notice that John gives us the important details that he was “a Pharisee... a leader of the Jews.” So immediately we know that this is a man who understands discipline. He is focused and is able to recite for you’re the 613 *mitzvah* of the Torah...His name was Nicodemus (which ironically means, “Victory of the people”).

He says to Jesus, "Teacher, we've seen you do some impressive things, like turning that ginger ale punch into a nice Cabernet Sauvignon last Saturday at the wedding in Cana. So teacher, how do you get into the kingdom of God? What do I have to do to get whatever it is that you have?" he asks...

Jesus replies, "I have three things that I want to say about that. Point one: You have to be born from above to see the kingdom. Point two: You have got to get the Spirit. Point three: The wind blows where it will."

That was Jesus. Ask him a simple straightforward question and he answers with parables, birth, spirit, wind. Nicodemus comes in from the dark seeking light. What have I got to do? How is it possible for me? And Jesus responds with surprising images. Birth. Wind. Spirit.

¹ Rolf Jacobson, “Rethinking the ‘Lenten Journey’: The Train Has left the Station (part 1 of 2)”, *Working Preacher*, February 5, 2014. Referenced Thursday, March 13, 2014:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3026>

² [Olgivieinstitute.s3.amazonaws.com/ljo_mg_resources/Michael_Phelps-CNN.mp4](https://s3.amazonaws.com/ljo_mg_resources/Michael_Phelps-CNN.mp4)

You want to get into the kingdom? Simple. Just be born from above. "Well, how can you do that? Can you teach an old dog new tricks? Can you go back into your mother's womb and be born a second time? "

Jesus says, "You can get yourself into your mother's womb about as easily as you can get yourself into the kingdom. You must be born again, but from above. (The Greek word *ανωθεν*, is ambiguous. It can mean "again" or "from above" (or "from top to bottom"). As so often happens in John's Gospel, somebody hears, but doesn't hear. When Jesus first said born from "above," Nick thought he heard him say "again." How can you be born a second time? Jesus, reiterated, "I said *born from above!*"

Isn't it interesting that when many people talk about this passage today, making it the very hallmark of Christian faith, the one necessary path to the kingdom, they often speak of the way Nicodemus *misunderstood* it rather than the way Jesus *explained* it!

In fact, new life involves new beginnings. There is a restarting again and again and again... The life of faith and repentance is not a once and done event. It's a multiple times a day occurrence for me and most Christians. But the gift of new life, of God's salvation is something that we can't do for ourselves. It must be given to us. It is a result of God's grace. It's the fruit of the Spirit. And by the way, the word here for *Spirit* and *Wind* in the Greek is the same word...

Did you realize that there is more self-help literature available than at any other time in the history of the universe. I read recently that in one internet minute, more than 204 million emails are sent. Around 20 million photos are viewed... At least 6 million Facebook pages are viewed. And more than 61,000 hours of music are played while more than 1.3 million video clips are watched on YouTube.³ We can send all that information in one second! But are we really that much better off?

Broken families turn into statistics at an increasing rate. More children are refugees than ever before. And for all the connectivity our technology affords, we are a part of a world where violence is now the communication of choice among an increasing number of people. And it happens in less news-worthy forms... child and spouse abuse, divorce, rape, incest, suicide... We, you and me, all need renewal and reformation. But it is highly questionable whether that will come about with simply *more information...and us figuring it all out!*

Strangely, the information we really need we already have... Jesus invites us to hold up our own sin and to reflect on it more deeply. That whole business about "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..." is a reference to the story in Numbers 21 where the people of Israel were so rebellious and disobedient, God sent serpents to bite them. Many of them fell deathly ill. Moses pleaded

³ Krystal Temple, "What Happens in an Internet Minute," Intel's online magazine *Scoop*, published March 13, 2012; referenced March 13, 2014: <http://scoop.intel.com/what-happens-in-an-internet-minute/>

with God. God came up with the cure. He had Moses put a snake on a stick and hold it up. When the people looked at the snake they were healed...

Jesus also had to be lifted up. And we put him there. We lifted him up on the cross... Paul writes, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (II Cor. 5:21).

We don't have to go very far to find new life. Wherever we may be, we first need to look at our sin and brokenness and confess it. It is right here... right here in my heart... That's why any self-help project is doomed from the very beginning. We can *manage* sin, but we can't set ourselves free or be healed from the effects of sin.

This all makes us very anxious and fidgety. It sounds so much like bad news. We don't need to hear any more of that, you think. But remember the gospel: "Cheer up, your situation is far worse than you could have ever imagined. But cheer up, God's love for you is far greater than you could have ever hoped." I want to drive home Jesus' point that our help is not in and of our own doing, of our own technological achievements, however brilliant they may be. Our help is from *above*, or as the Psalmist wrote, "Our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." Notice how the Psalmist doesn't give any directions here. He just says the only sure thing he knows when push comes to shove: *The Lord will be your help, at all times and forever.* Period.

You must be born from above! Getting into the Kingdom of God is a lot like getting born... And how did that happen? Well, somebody did a lot of work, but it wasn't me! Sort of like the wind... "The Wind blows where it will. You don't know where it comes from. You don't know to where it goes... You can't control, predict, or harness it... Getting into my kingdom is a lot like that," says Jesus...

How can this happen? ... And then Jesus says the most beautiful thing in all of scripture: "*For God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life! 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.*" Thank God he still loves this broken down old world, and that God still gives new life! It's pure gift. Grace... You see, God did do something about our sin. Jesus went on a journey... all the way to the cross. He took the problem of our sin upon himself. "He who knew no sin became sin..." so that we might be free, so that we might have new life, so that we might live again not for our glory but for God's glory!

Nicodemus replies (for us), "I just don't understand it." And Jesus said, "Now you're catching on!" "You must be born from above." (By the way, the Greek "you " here is plural. Jesus was from the South. *You all* must be born from above.)

We think we need to go on a Lenten journey, but that's really not how spiritual transformation works. We're not going anywhere by our own efforts... You come in here on a Sunday like today, not sure if you want to be here, your mind elsewhere, your heart elsewhere as well. Perhaps a café or a museum... or some really sick people want to be back at the office... And then, during the service, the music, the prayers, or even

the sermon, something gets hold of you, your heart melts, your soul is lifted, your will is resolved to live anew...

I don't understand how God's salvation works. But I do know this: *The Spirit blows where he chooses.* And I do know that God has given us what is most precious in order to show us the depth of his love for us...

One final note... Nicodemus became St. Nicodemus in the early church. He was so revered that even an apocryphal gospel was named after him... In fact, he shows up a couple more times in the Gospel according to John. It's Nicodemus who defends Jesus in chapter seven. And it was Nicodemus who helped Joseph of Arimathea to help prepare Jesus' body for burial after the crucifixion in chapter 19. Something happened to Nicodemus. His faith turned to action. The Spirit breathed new life into a Pharisee.

Friends, the good news for us is the Spirit still breathes new life. We are asked simply to believe... To receive God's great love. And paradoxically, as we believe, as we lay down all of our projects and plans and give way to the wind, birth, love and grace happens.... And we arrive in a new place, surprisingly headed toward Easter New Life...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.