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Genesis 12:1-4; **John 3:1-17**

BORN AGAIN

Nicodemus is curious about this guy Jesus who he had been hearing about. He'd like to go talk to Jesus but Nicodemus has a problem. You see, he is a Pharisee--a religious leader. And the religious leaders were not too happy with Jesus. They didn't like how Jesus seemed to violate the religious rules, how he hung out with disreputable people, how he taught strange and outlandish things about God's abundant love. So, afraid for his reputation, Nicodemus comes to find Jesus under the cover of darkness. He tells Jesus that it is obvious that Jesus is sent from God because of all the signs that Jesus has been doing. But Jesus answers Nicodemus that we can't really see God's presence, God's kingdom, unless we have been born from above. What this sets off is a somewhat comedic exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus because the Greek phrase Jesus uses for "born from above" can also be translated as "born again." It has two meanings. It turns out that Nicodemus is a literalist and so when Jesus says a person must be born from above, Nicodemus hears "born again" and can't understand how a person can re-enter their mother's womb.

Which translation did the gospel writer of John mean for us to use: born from above or born again? Well, probably both. Because both apply. Jesus' message was that we need to know the rebirth that can come from the Spirit. He tells Nicodemus, this Pharisee who is so afraid to be associated with Jesus that he comes skulking around after dark, Jesus tells him that "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit . . . you must be born from above, you must be born again."

Born again. In our contemporary age, conservative Christians seemed to have a near monopoly on the use of that phrase. Other Christians, maybe you are one of them, are uncomfortable with this phrase. That may be because we have met a self-proclaimed born again Christian who was excessively zealous for the faith to the point of being obnoxious. Or our discomfort may come from some corners of the Christian world whose born again experience leads them to being judgmental, self-righteous, and rigid. But being born again, or being born from above, lies at the heart of the Christian message, and perhaps it is time we tried to re-claim that message for ourselves. Being born again is about transformation. And God's power to transform is the heart of the Christian life. Think about that. The heart of Christianity is not about following certain rules. It's about transformation.

Take baptism. Along with proclaiming God's love for us, baptism, whether it is for an infant or an adult, symbolizes transformation. We are leaving behind an old way of being and exchanging it for a new way of being. The old life is discarded for the new life in Christ. And while each and every day will pose a challenge to us to live out this new life, and we will often fail, we declare in baptism that the new life in Christ will be our goal, our aspiration.

Easter is about transformation. We proclaim on Easter that God has taken death and transformed it into life. That includes our dead-end, broken lives while we are yet living and breathing and walking around on this earth as well as what happens to our dead selves after we die. The Christian message is about God's power to transform us. And while we can't make transformation happen--we are told the Spirit is in charge of that--we can be more open to the blowing of the Spirit. We can be more open to what God is birthing in us. We can be open to being born again.

The trouble is, we tend to resist change. Even when we know that the change will be a good thing, we are often hesitant, fearful, maybe even completely resistant. The new marriage, the new job, the new baby, the new move may bring wonderful blessings, and yet, there is often within us a resistance to the changes that will come about. Sometimes we choose to stay in the old because we are anxious about the new.

And sometimes we don't see any need to change at all. We are content with our lives. We are content with our selves. We are content with our ideas and opinions. We are settled. This is who we are, we tell ourselves and others. This is what we think. This is how we live. This is what I believe. And we don't see any need to examine our selves, our opinions, our lifestyles, our habits.

The thing is about life, we can't avoid change. Change is always happening around us. Our children grow up and move away. Loved ones die. Our bodies don't look like they did five or ten years ago. Our cities and towns don't look like they did five or ten years ago. Our favorite restaurant or donut shop may have closed down. New buildings go up in their place. Manufactures stop making our favorite brand of coffee or deodorant or toothpaste. Our favorite pair of shoes finally falls apart. Change is always happening around us and to us, forcing us to adapt. But what about our hearts and minds and souls? Sometimes our hearts and minds and souls are stuck back in time--to when we were 13 or 20. And everything about us and around us changes except what lies within. This is who we are, we tell ourselves and others. But Jesus says to us, "you must be born again." And that means, he is calling us to change, no matter our age, our status, our position.

God says to Abram in our Genesis reading for today, "Get up and go to a new land that I will show you." God was calling Abram to make a move--to leave his homeland, the place he

had lived his entire life. To leave behind his house, to leave behind a way of life he was familiar with, to leave behind neighbors and friends, and to make a move to a new place. Maybe some of you have had to do something similar in your lives. Moves like that are always challenging. But did you notice an interesting detail that was included in this story? Abram was 75 years old. At a time in life when Abram should have been settling in to retirement, God calls him to embrace newness. It is a reminder that not one of us, no matter our age or situation in life, should be so settled in life or in thought that we do not allow God's Spirit to lead us into newness. Jesus tells us, "You must be born again, you must be born from above."

The documentary we showed this past week at the Lenten program, primarily focused on two young men, Ryan and Joshua who were friends and who each heard a call in their hearts and souls to make a radical change in their lives. They each had achieved tremendous professional and economic success--making six figure salaries and rising up the ladder in their corporate jobs. They had nice homes, lots of possessions, and were progressing fully on the path that defines the American Dream. Except for one thing. They were miserable. They both began to realize that they weren't happy living out this narrowly defined American Dream based on making money and consuming things. And so they made a radical change. They walked away from the path they were on, quit their high paying jobs, radically reduce their possessions, and began to live a more intentional, deliberate life focused on relationships. They have helped launch a movement called "minimalism," a lifestyle that seeks to find greater meaning in life by stepping off the consuming path. Their departure from this conventional path is a radical one in our society because they weren't just downsizing a bit. These guys left the path. They dramatically shifted the focus of their lives, the way they would live, the priorities that would guide them. I noticed that Ryan's last name was, ironically, Nicodemus. And I thought the symbolism was fitting. For

like the biblical Nicodemus, Ryan Nicodemus was also invited to be born again. He and his friend experienced a major transformation in their lives. And while neither attributed a spiritual cause to this transformation, I couldn't help but feel that they were not only born again but were also "born from above," --that the wind of the Spirit had blown into their lives and they had responded.

But what about the biblical Nicodemus? Does he let the Spirit into his life? Does he answer Jesus' call to be born again? Or does he slink out of sight, under the cover of darkness, back to the old life, the familiar life, the settled life? Maybe we can draw an inference from where and how we see Nicodemus surface again in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus enters the story again at the crucifixion where he helps another follower take Jesus' body down from the cross. There in the light of day, where all could see him, where all could see who he followed, to whom he was devoted, there in public view Nicodemus brings all the ointments and spices for the body and helps wrap Jesus' body in the cloth for its burial. No more hiding in the dark. And this display sure looks a lot like transformation. It looks like being born again and born from above.