

A New Birth

John 3:1-17

Second Sunday in Lent, (March 5) 2023

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Our text this morning is Nicodemus coming to see Jesus in the middle of the night and learning that he must be born again. The climax to the story is the famous verse John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life,” as the old King James puts it and how many of us memorized it when we were children.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, so says John. In other words, he was well-educated, well read, well thought of by his community, was accustomed to being in leadership positions, and had a deep faith. He came to confer with Jesus, maybe have a conversation with this remarkable young rabbi, sophisticated in his thinking beyond his years.

The famous evangelist from a hundred years ago, Billy Sunday, was a major league baseball player, when he walked out of a Chicago bar one day and said to one of his teammates, “I’m through. I am going to Jesus Christ.” After that he gave up bars, drinking, gambling, and playing baseball, and went to preaching.

That was not Nicodemus. “It’s not what we do in seminars, sessions, interviews, or thoughtful dialogues. Stark and dramatic conversion? Getting saved? That’s not our style. We have a symposium. Maybe a conference.”

We went at night, in the dark. It’s not that we are embarrassed to go see Jesus or self-conscious of going to see this young evangelist. We went because we

find ourselves in what feels like night. Things are not good. Everything seems to be in chaos and confusion – growing nationalism, climate change, gun violence, cancer, division, authoritarianism, mean politics, divorce, brokenness, and the aftermath of a pandemic. Our world seems to be turning upside-down, and we see no sign that it is going to right itself. Our previous answers fall flat, and old approaches seem, ... well, old. Antiquated. It's dark. Perhaps conferring with this young teacher might raise some interesting questions and provide other angles of thought. Maybe we'll learn something. Nothing else seems to be working. Maybe he can give us some light.

We sit down for our session, our interview with Jesus and it doesn't take long to discover that Jesus interviews us. Jesus says, "You know, Nicodemus/Austin Heights, you're smart, in fact, you're accustomed to being the smartest person/church in the room, you work hard, and do good stuff. Important stuff. But you need to be born again."

"What do you mean, Jesus? We've been doing this a long time. We're thinking about rearranging the furniture. We're cleaning out cabinets. Maybe tinkering with this or that. Kyle's trying to lose some weight, and we're going to do more with social media, perhaps a new coat of paint..."

"No, no," Jesus says. "I'm talking about a new birth. Born again."

Poet Miller Williams has a book of essays called *Making a Poem: Some Thoughts about Poetry and the People Who Write It*. Williams taught at the Univ. of Arkansas, was the father of singer/songwriter Lucinda Williams, and delivered the inaugural poem at Bill Clinton's second inauguration. Williams died in 2015. The title of the first chapter in the book by itself is worth the price of the book. It's called, "Nobody Plays the Piano, but We Like to Have It in the House." In the

essay Williams notes items and customs we have around but no longer use. For instance, he notes that the buttons on a man's suit coat sleeve once held his lace cuff out of his soup. We still have the buttons but only for ornamental reasons. Or our tradition of the touching of two glasses in a toast came from those times when royals would mix a bit of their drinks together to assure each other that no poisoning was going on; or the shaking of hands, which once was a way of showing a person we met that we carried no weapon. Williams goes on to point out things in our homes which get no use but still are idols to lost ambitions – the copy of *War & Peace* on the bookshelf that one day we're going to read, the French cookbook on display in the kitchen, or the baby grand piano in the living room that has been there for three generations and for at least two generations no one in the family has played it.

We could come up with our own list: the family Bible on the table that no one opens anymore, the shelves of LP's that no one plays anymore – even if they have a record player. Or that tennis racket in the closet, old clothes which we might wear again, or maybe the treadmill that has become a clothes rack ... Williams is not talking about out-of-date stuff as much as things that are vestiges not just obsolete but reveal once-held dreams that have vanished.

“One of these days I'm going to learn to play that piano.”

All of this got me to thinking, what are the things and ideas of the church that no longer make sense? Let me be clear. There is much we do that does not seem relevant to the wider world. Relevance is not something the church should pay much attention to. Our big question is faithfulness. Are we faithful to Jesus Christ? That's the criteria for evaluating what we do and what we don't do.

Nevertheless, there are some things we do or not do that are leftovers from a bygone era that can get in the way of being faithful. For example, when I was growing up, churches of all sorts held week-long revival meetings in August. They were held in August because in decades past, church revivals were held after the end of summer harvest and before school started so all the farmers and their families could participate. So, years later churches still held August revivals even when most of the congregation were no longer involved in agriculture. The issue was not whether the church needed revival meetings or perhaps other forms of renewal together. The issue was that they were still doing it just like they did 75 years before and it no longer met the needs of being faithful to Christ in a different world.

Another example: In our church kitchen is a button. Push the button and it rings a bell that can be heard throughout the building. It was installed in the early 1970's when congregations – much larger congregations – had similar bells which would let the entire congregation know when it was time for Sunday School to end and for everyone to transition to the worship service. We had one when I was a kid in a church that had 400 people in Sunday School spread out in a two-story building and in numerous classrooms in nooks and crannies. Having bells was “the thing” in 1950's and 1960's churches. For Austin Heights to install one in 1971 in our small building was about both, this is how we know how to do Sunday School coupled with the hope that someday we might be big enough to need that bell for real.

I am not suggesting that we worry over the bell. We don't use it and it is not in the way. I'm simply asking you to use your imagination in this church and in your life.

Jesus says, “You know maybe here in the darkness it might be time for a new birth. When things are dark, what might the Holy Spirit be leading you to do that helps you be faithful in the darkness? To be born again means that your life will never be the same again. It means big-time change, top to bottom change, inside and out change. New birth means new and different responsibility and a lot of work, and Nicodemus/Austin Heights you’re thinking, ‘I’ve already done a lot of work, I’m tired and ready to coast a little, maybe do some traveling,’ but when you miss out on new birth, you’re also missing out on surprise and wonder. You’re missing out on the love of God for the whole world that shows up in amazing ways.”

Jesus goes on to say, “Lots of people and politicians think the chaos and confusion and darkness is the darkness of a tomb. They think the darkness is all about endings – the end of American exceptionalism, the end of White privilege, the end of doing whatever you want with no accountability to the earth, or to other people, the end of what is comfortable, what is known and familiar. But what if the darkness is the darkness of the womb, and not the tomb? What if new birth is happening? What if the world is currently in the middle of a difficult labor and this world needs churches, communities of disciples who know how to mid-wife this labor because they already know about being born again?”

We might say back to Jesus, “What might this look like? What do we need to do?”

Jesus says to us like he did to Nicodemus, “The Spirit, the Wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

Austin Heights, we have a long history of being imaginative and being willing to take risks if it means being faithful to Christ. Being born again with Jesus is not a once and for all kind of thing. It keeps happening.

Who knows what's next?

This story does not tell us what Nicodemus decided to do. What we do know is that way over in John 19, after Jesus is crucified, Pilate gave permission to Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, and member of the Sanhedrin, to take the dead body of Jesus away. He was joined by his friend, Nicodemus, who brought along a lot of sweet-smelling ointments and spices, and linen cloth, and wrapped the body. Then they placed the body in a tomb, sealed it, and rolled a massive stone across the entrance, closing it permanently.

Everyone thought it was a tomb. It was over. It has ended.

But I wonder... maybe old smart Nicodemus walked away but kept looking back over his shoulder. You never know about this new birth stuff. Who knows what's next? And man, oh man, the wind sure has gotten up...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.