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SERMON TITLE: "Jesus Explains the Meaning of Born Again"

SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-22

DATE: February 18, 2018

Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

READ JOHN 3:1-22 and EZEKIEL 36:22-28

Jesus was approachable. Crowds came to him. Disciples followed him. Servants listened to him. Working class or the rich and powerful; it did not matter. All were drawn to him. He was open to all. That's quite evident in John.

Nicodemus worked in the courts. He was a judge who worked on the supreme religious court in Jerusalem. Called The Great Sanhedrin, seventy-one statesmen met in the Chamber of Hewn Stones in the temple to legislate the law. One of their tasks was to be on the lookout for false Messiahs. These men met daily.ⁱ This man was a very busy, highly professional leader of the Jewish people.

Perhaps that is why Nicodemus went to Jesus at night.

From the beginning there was tension between the Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees had a prescribed lifestyle based both on the Torah, which was like our U.S. Constitution, and the Talmud, which were written interpretations of the Torah. The result was highly defined rules about faith and lifestyle. These interpretive rules had been adhered to since Moses.

The Pharisees were the keepers and enforcers of these laws. These were powerful and prominent people, like our own Supreme Court justices. Nothing could crack them.

Have you seen powerful people who were unmovable about their own belief system? That's a touchy question today. The world is filled with them.

In May, 1940 when England was threatened by the German army which attacked from all sides with great power and fierceness, England's entire army was cornered on Dunkirk facing certain death. Yet political sentiment was resistance to the war. Leaders were stuck on seeking negotiations with Hitler. But Prime Minister Churchill knew that peace and survival as a nation would not come through negotiating with this tyrant. He said, "You cannot negotiate with a tiger when your head is in its mouth." He knew they must defeat the enemy and win. He had to challenge both the public's and the Parliament's systems of belief to change their view. It was no small task.ⁱⁱ

505

Similarly, Jesus would challenge the established systems of belief with something entirely new.

Jesus came to earth with one mission: to defeat the tiger who had us by the throat and win. That tiger was hard-heartedness and sin. In John, Jesus confronts the Pharisees about their lack of belief in him. This is the battle to change the tide of the world's belief system. So what does our rescue look like?

Let's notice Nicodemus the Pharisee, who came to Jesus one dark night.

Nicodemus called Jesus a good teacher. Do you or your friends call Jesus a good teacher? A good teacher is not enough. Jesus didn't even answer that suggestion. He cut to the chase right away. "*Truthfully, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*" (Jn 3:3).

How would you feel if you received this sort of response? With the one sentence of, *Lord, you are a good teacher*, Jesus takes you to a whole other place.

It was a stretch for Nicodemus to move from thinking of being religious to grasping this "born again" stuff.

To Nicodemus, faith is about the flesh—faith is rule-keeping. You whip yourself into shape by meticulously following the rules. But rules don't make a connection. In fact, you can be a very good rule keeper and be quite harsh toward others. You might even want to accuse a rule-keeper as being self-righteous or hard hearted. It is even possible to add rule upon rule until the rules are quite burdensome, and they make you grouchy.

Rules do not result in love; rather, they often result in pride or judgment, even toward yourself.

Pharisees were rule-keepers who were always complaining about the rest of the church who were, in their opinion, ignoring the rules all together.

Both of these extremes are to live in darkness.

Neither extreme produces faith. Jesus accuses the Pharisees, saying, "We speak of what we know . . . and have seen; yet *you do not receive our testimony.*" . . . If I have told

you about earthly things and you do not believe, *how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?* (Jn 3:11-12).

What he was referring to was the Spirit. It's easy to ignore the Spirit when you concentrate on just keeping the rules. It's the difference between taking care of a car and following all the maintenance requirements and it lives a long time, vs. having a dog which you also have to commit to care for, but the dog and you interact and you receive something relationally from the dog. It has life.

A god who is only about keeping the rules but does not engage with you is not the Creator God of heaven and earth. Religion of rules is dead. The true religion of heaven is born of a God-given, Spirit-filled, tender heart.

Jesus said, "It's more than earthly duty; you've got to be born from above."

He explains: "The wind (πνεύματος) 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 (πνεύματος)" (Jn 3:8).

Think back to the meaning of the word spirit in Genesis. It means wind, breath of God, spirit, wind of energy. **The Spirit of God initiated life and light.** Jesus says "To enter the kingdom of God, you've got to have water and Spirit."

The Spirit must enter you. The alternative is darkness and death.

In Ezekiel's time, people failed at following God. They could not do it. God said:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations. You will be my people, and I will be your God (Ez. 37:25-27).

I will wash you – water. I will put my Spirit in you. This is being born from above. To get *there* requires a reorientation as drastic as a new birth.

Michelle Gibson lived in New Orleans all her life. She was a dancer, but she liked hanging out drinking daiquiris with her friends all evening. When Hurricane Katrina hit, she had to flee. Months later she returned, only to find her home destroyed beyond repair. She lost almost everything. For the sake of her family, she had to relocate to Dallas.

Her life had to be drastically reoriented. "Displaced, yet rebirthed is her survival story." She is now thriving in a way she never thought imaginable, and even tells her story through her staging of *Displaced, Yet Rebirthed*, for Dallas Black Dance Theatre. She says, "Even after 12 years, I catch myself. 'Where am I?' I came to a place I never dreamed of living." She now has a future.ⁱⁱⁱ

Being born again is that sort of place. It is a place of life, not death. Being born again is not just being reborn like a child, it is a whole new creation. It's uniting with God from the heart, a new origination from the source of love.

We understand disobedience. Can we grasp becoming a new creation?

To save us and our world from the darkness of rebellion and sin was the entire mission of Jesus Christ. "For God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him *should not perish* but have everlasting life." (Jn 3:16)

Jesus went to war for us. He came with the purpose and mission that people may live and not be lost. Do you want to live? It requires a new set of commitments.

It is identifying with a new family; doing the will of God; receiving God's abundance; trusting Jesus, no longer living unto yourself. You live by faith in good or bad times, always looking to the coming age.

Jesus calls it being "born again of water and the Spirit."

People are separated in two ways: "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (Jn 3:18)

John contrasts both lifestyles: "Light has come into the world, but humans loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." Are you living in the light? Are you born from above? It takes a radical new birth to be saved from the tiger.

AMEN

ⁱ Encyclopedia Judaica, "*Sanhedrin*." (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971). See <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-sanhedrin>, accessed February 14, 2018.

ⁱⁱ May 13, 1940 speech to the House of Commons, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood,_toil,_tears_and_sweat, accessed February 14, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Manuel Mendoza, 'Displaced Yet Rebirthed,' <https://www.dallasnews.com/arts/dance/2018/02/12/katrina-survivor-isnt-shy-explaining-rich-soil-new-orleans-hometown-infuses-choreography>, accessed February 14, 2018.