

John 3:1-21
From Degenerate to Regenerate
WRCoB 1.23.22

I grew up in church!

Every Sunday, whether we wanted to or not
Mom and Dad dragged us four children
To Sunday school and church.

We were immersed in church life! Literally!

I was baptized by immersion at the age of twelve.

And yet . . . when I was 16-years-old
My parents allowed me to make up my own mind
And I stopped going!

Don't know for sure why?
I guess it didn't seem like the cool thing to do.

And for a couple of years thereafter
Late teens and early twenties
I became what you might call a degenerate.

I straightened out . . . somewhat . . .

Married, started a family
But still had no interest in church.

When I was 34-years-old
I agreed to attend my home church
Following an invitation by my parents.

I can't remember much of the service!

Can't remember if the sermon moved me in any way!

All I can say was that something touched me so
That I wept through the closing of the service.

It was communion.

There was something about the bread and cup
The love expressed in their meaning
That touched me.

There was something about the humble expression of faith
Of the obedient communicants that touched me too.

What happened on that particular day?

All those years of going to church

And then at 34 . . . BAM . . . all of what I had been taught
Made sense in a way I never understood before!

There was a sense of peace and joy
I had never before experienced.

All of a sudden Jesus became
THE most important person in my life.

In today's passage, Jesus calls this being born from above
Or being born again as some translation state.

And let me say this . . . I wasn't looking for it!
It caught me totally off guard.

It was the work of the Holy Spirit.

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Today's passage has us in Jerusalem
Following the Passover celebration.

One evening Jesus heard a knock at the door.

It was Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin.

He had a doctorate in theology
And held the distinguished chair of religious studies
At the Temple University.

He knew his stuff.

He knew he knew his stuff
Everyone knew he knew his stuff!

He was impressed with Jesus and told him so.

But so as not to look too eager to have a chat with Jesus
He came when everyone was asleep.

He begins by saying
That they could tell he was from God
Due to the signs he performed.

Jesus responds in an indirect way.

First, he tells Nicodemus
That to be able to see the kingdom of God
One must be born from above.

Well, that confuses Nicodemus
And he says as much.

Jesus pushes the metaphor a bit
And says no one can enter the kingdom
Without being born of water AND spirit.

Well, Nicodemus is even more confusing.

Jesus then tries to explain it another way.

Jesus tells him the wind blows where it will
So it is with one who is born of the Spirit.

Well, Nicodemus had had enough.
It was more than he wanted to hear.

But since Nicodemus woke him up
Jesus wasn't quite ready to let him go.

He told Nicodemus things beyond his grasp.

Things like, no one ascended into heaven
Except the one who descended from heaven
The Son of Man.

Jesus said the Son of Man must be lifted up
Like Moses when he lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.

Jesus said God so loved the world
He sent his only Son

So that whoever believes in him
Shall not perish but have eternal life.

And then concludes by telling Nicodemus
That light has come into the world
But people loved darkness more.

But those who do right come into the light
So their deeds may be seen as coming from God.

End of conversation.

Maybe Nicodemus was sorry he'd come.

We are not sure any of what Jesus said sunk in.

We do know that later on

Nicodemus came to Jesus' defense

And then after Jesus was crucified

He along with Joseph of Arimathea

Took the body of Jesus

And quickly prepared it for burial before the Sabbath.

But most of what Jesus said was in the Jewish Scriptures.

But it sounded like new stuff.

And it got Nicodemus reflecting that

This Jesus could actually be the Christ

They were looking for.

This whole born from above thing

You'd think Nicodemus would have understood.

Nicodemus would have known of spiritual awakenings

It was written all over scripture.

It was Moses and the burning bush

It was Samuel and God's call in the night.

It was Jeremiah answering the Lord's call at age 12.

And it was Isaiah when he heard God's voice ask
Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

That moment when God touches you
And you're never the same.

The moment when, as the Apostle Paul states

1

2 Corinthians 5:17 NRSV

17 there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

It is the work of the Spirit

I was raised in a Christian family.

I went to church every Sunday.

I was baptized.

But I never fully understood the gospel message

Until that particular day at 34-years-old

When something unexplainable happened.

As the Bill Gaither song says

"Something happened and now I know

He touched me and made me whole.

I went from a degenerate to a regenerate.

Though I confess I am still a work in progress.

~~

I read a powerful testimony.

From journalist, Kirsten Powers of CNN and USA Today.

She shared her personal “coming to Jesus” moment
In the November 2013 issue of Christianity Today

She writes

2

Just seven years ago, if someone had told me that I'd be writing for Christianity Today magazine about how I came to believe in God, I would have laughed out loud.

3

If there was one thing in which I was completely secure, it was that I would never adhere to any religion—especially to evangelical Christianity, which I held in particular contempt.

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But after Powers dated a Christian man
Who had asked her, a liberal
To be open-minded about Jesus

She reluctantly agreed to go to church with him.

She was “creeped out” by the whole thing. Her words.

She began to visit Timothy Keller's
Redeemed Presbyterian Church in NYC.

She enjoyed the feeling of community
And Keller's intellectually stimulating sermons.

But she said she didn't feel any connection to God.

And she was fine with that.

Those who spoke of experiencing the presence of God
She claimed were either delusional or lying.

4

*“In my most generous moments, I allowed they were just
imagining things that made them feel good.”*

~~

Then, she writes, one night on a to flight to Taiwan
In a state of being half sleep/half awake

“Jesus came to me. He said, ‘Here I am.’”

She called her boyfriend

But before she had a chance to explain

He told her he had been praying for her.

She wrote it all off as just being overly tired.

But she couldn’t shake the experience.

She asked a friend what she should do

And he said she should join a Bible study.

5

*“I remember walking into the Bible study. I had a knot in my
stomach. In my mind, only weirdos and zealots went to Bible
studies. I don’t remember what was said that day. All I know
is that when I left, everything had changed.*

6

*I’ll never forget standing outside that apartment on the Upper
East Side and saying to myself, ‘It’s true. It’s completely
true.’ The world looked entirely different, like a veil had been
lifted off it. I had not one iota of doubt. I was filled with
indescribable joy.”*

There is a saying among the early Puritans.

That when a man is born again
So great was the subsequent change in his life

That not only did he notice it
But his wife noticed it

And not only did she notice it
But his friends noticed it

And not only did his friends notice it
But even his horse noticed it.

~~

One of the issues in church today
Is that we have relegated Jesus
Into the role of mascot.

We make Jesus reflect our current political views
We project our own agendas onto Him
We use Jesus to defend our ideologies

Rather than the reverse . . .
Recognizing Jesus for who He is
And not what we want him to be.

Jesus is the Son of the Living God
The Alpha and Omega
Who is and who was
And is to come, the Almighty!

That night, as Nicodemus walked away
From his shadowy encounter with Jesus

He must have thought Jesus was either demented
Or was who he claimed to be, the Son of God.

And it is only through God's Holy Spirit
That the truth concerning Jesus is revealed.

And it is my prayer that God bestow upon you
The blessing being born from above
To see and to enter the kingdom of God.

As Ezekiel said

7

Ezekiel 36:26 NRSV

**²⁶ A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put
within you . . .**

Oh God, may it be so. Amen.