

Ezekiel 36:24-29

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you.

John 3:1-8

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*

Jesus answered him, Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

Nicodemus said to him, *How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?*

Jesus answered, Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." 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.

This is the Word of the Lord; thanks be to God! Join me in prayer. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer ~ Amen

Born of the Flesh

I love words and wordplay. I used to solve cryptograms and acrostic puzzles, but nowadays I do the Spelling Bee and Wordle in the New York Times app. I often take the time to discover the etymology, or origin, of words. I am often amused by Hebrew wordplay and even more often by my own wordplay. I felt the need to warn you about that aspect of my nature, so that you'll understand why I always smile when I read the beginning of the third chapter of the Gospel of John. I have, much to my amusement, named this story, "Nick at Nite." (SMILE)

So Nick, Nicodemus, comes to see Jesus one night and begins making polite conversation; he starts with an approving assessment of Jesus and his ministry. *Clearly you are a teacher who has come from God*, he says, acknowledging that Jesus isn't just some shyster trying to con the masses for his own profit. *No one can do the things you do apart from God*, Nick says, recognizing that the miracle Jesus has performed are neither tricks nor works of Satan.

Jesus responds by immediately moving the conversation from polite chit-chat to deep theological discussion. He says, "**No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.**"

This is clearly not the kind of conversation Nicodemus expected to have with Jesus! Jesus is talking about being *born again*, which makes no sense to him. There is a tremendous amount of theology going on in those two sentences, too much for us to cover in just one sermon. Today we're going to focus on one theological concept and in two weeks we'll focus on another. Right now we'll consider what it means to be born of the flesh; in June we will consider what it means to be born of the spirit. I know today is

Pentecost, and you would think I would start with the Spirit, but alas, it makes more sense to follow the order Jesus set out.

So, what does it mean to be *born of the flesh*? Let's look at the context of our text. What did it mean to a man like Nicodemus—a Jew, a Pharisee, a leader under Roman rule in the early part of the first century—to be *born of the flesh*?

Well, born of the flesh to Nick primarily meant he was born a Jew. He could trace his ancestry back to one of the 12 tribes of Israel. It meant he bore a symbol of that ancestry *in his flesh*: he was circumcised on the eighth day. It meant he was raised to obey the dietary and social laws of Moses. It meant he was trained in the Torah, the Word of God as given to the Jewish people. He was a Jew: he was one of God's chosen people!

Not only that, he was also a *Pharisee*. This was a particular sect of Judaism, sort of like a denomination today. For example, we in this room are Christians, but more specifically, most of us are Presbyterians. Nicodemus was a Jew, more specifically, a Pharisee. Pharisees followed very strict dietary and moral and behavioral laws. They followed these laws in an effort to be as pious, as right with God, as they possibly could be. They were particularly concerned with ritual purity, which means they followed strict routines for washing their bodies. They washed before meals, before worship, before touching anything *holy*. They were also strict observers of the Sabbath. And they tithed, giving a 10th of their income to the synagogue. *By what they did* with their flesh, their bodies, their possessions, their time, Pharisees declared themselves to be Jews, people of Yahweh. In doing so, they relied on *their flesh* to bring them into right relationship with God.

Today, there are many people who, like Nicodemus and the Pharisees, rely on *their flesh* to determine their relationship with God. Some of these people are Christians and are active members of

God's church. They have been baptized, and they take communion when it's served. They may be elders or deacons, leaders of the Women's Group or Sunday School teachers. Part of what drives them to serve is the underlying, maybe even subconscious, belief that it is their *works* that will get them into heaven. It's as if heaven were a college and they're trying to make sure they get accepted. So they rack up extra credit points and extra-curricular activities. They pounce on opportunities to show off their leadership skills or improve their SAT scores or GPAs.

Unfortunately, the result of relying on our flesh for righteousness has unintentional negative consequences. One person may develop an attitude of *superiority* and *self-righteousness* because of all that she's accomplished, while someone else may develop an attitude of *inferiority* and *worthlessness* because he never seems to accomplish enough. Another person may become obsessed with pursuing perfection, while someone else is broken by the burden of such an impossible standard.

Ultimately, however, what we *do*, no matter how faithful, no matter how sacrificial, no matter how perfect, **will never make us right with God.**

Then what will?

The answer was standing there right in front of Nicodemus: Jesus the Christ, the Word made flesh! God *incarnate*, literally *God in the flesh*, is what will make us right with God. This is one of the deepest mysteries of our faith, one that angels marveled at (1 Peter 1:12).

God *took on human flesh* in order to *redeem our human flesh*. However, Jesus was born of the flesh, as the son of Mary, *and at the same time he was born* of the Spirit, as the Son of God. It is through His flesh, His life, death, and resurrection that we are reconciled to God. The answer to man's deepest question was standing right in front of him and Nicodemus didn't get it. At least not then.

Nicodemus is mentioned by name two other places in the Bible and in those passages we see the light dawning on him. I am not going to read those two passages to you, but I encourage you to read them later today and consider what they show us about Nicodemus's spiritual growth. The passages are:
John 7:50 & John 19:39

I also encourage you to take the truth of this scripture to heart. This isn't just head stuff; it's not just intellectual mumbo jumbo. Yes, the truth of the incarnation is *classical*/theology, but it is also *practical*/theology. To paraphrase Shirley Guthrie, who was professor of Systematic Theology at Columbia Theological seminary, in Jesus Christ God came to us in the flesh and put God's stamp of approval on human life. By *becoming* a man, God demonstrated the *value* of human beings. And if you want to know God, you need to look for God at work in the kind of places Jesus frequented: in the everyday world, among ordinary human beings, participating in secular human affairs, present in human failure and suffering. God is at work there, too, not just in heaven, in church, and in religious affairs, not only where there is personal and collective success and happiness. For God is the God who comes to us in the man Jesus, who was born in a **stable**, grew up to be the friend of **sinners** and advocate of all who are **poor** and **oppressed**, and was (therefore) **tried** and **condemned** in a courtroom and **executed** at **public executions grounds**. If you want to know what it means to be a genuinely human being and to stand for the cause of humanity – look at Jesus Christ.

If you want to know who God is and what God is doing in the world – look at Jesus Christ. [Christian Doctrine, p. 247-248]

If we take this truth to heart, then we need to ask, what do we value? Things or people? Some people or all people? If we value *all* of humanity, then when we look around at the world, what breaks our hearts? Personal hurts or social injustices? The truth of the

Incarnation calls for us to reach out to and to take care of God's children: their flesh and their spirits.

I'm encouraged by the work that you are doing here through the Filling Station, and I encourage you to trust that the One who came to us in the flesh will enable you to do more for the Kingdom of God than you can ask or imagine through the work of the Holy Spirit among you.

AMEN