

Born Again  
John 3:1-15  
January 26, 2020 – First Congregational Church of Meredith NH  
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This is a sermon where you have to do a little work. Thinking work.  
Remembering work.

So, I invite you to look back over your life for a moment. Think of yourself as a very young child, where you lived, the clothes you wore, the games you played, your family relationships. Can you see the house you lived in then, and your own room? The table where you ate? Can see your favorite toy? Is there a photograph from that period in a box somewhere that comes to your mind now? Does it show you as a happy child? Or an anxious one? Or angry?

[pause]

Now think of yourself in elementary school. Can you smell the chalk dust and the paste? See the marks on your schoolwork? Taste spaghetti they fed you at lunch? Feel your skinned knee from playing at recess? Did you have a bicycle? Or roller skates? When teams were chosen, were you picked first, or last? Do you remember a school picture from this period when you were the snaggle-toothed kid on the second row, or the one with all the freckles?

[pause]

Next, think of yourself as a teenager, full of hormones and embarrassed to death by the pimples on your face. Can you recall the growth spurts that made your

clothes suddenly too small? The new skills you developed as you grew? The braces on your teeth? Your first crush? Your first car? Is there a high school yearbook in your basement with pictures you treasure, or maybe ones you would rather never saw the light of day?

[pause]

Now remember your life as a young adult, making your way in the world for the first time, living away from home, establishing a family perhaps, or a career. Do you remember figuring out how to use a checkbook or a credit card, and being responsible for your own cooking and housekeeping? Did you do those things well, or did you have to make a doozy of a mistake – or more than one - to learn how to get it right? Were you confident in your adult choices? Did they turn out to be the right ones in the end? When you see pictures from these years, do you think how young you looked, and how thin? Or do you regret that sweater that you never should have worn in front of a camera?

[pause]

Thinking back on it now, what advice would you give to your younger self? What do you wish you had done differently? What do you wish you had understood? Looking back, I would play more and worry less. I would quit piano lessons sooner, skip the junior prom, be nicer to my sister Pam, wear sunscreen, and forego that first attempt at graduate school in the 1970s.

What would you do differently if you could live your life over again, knowing what you know now ... if you could be born again?

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A couple of weeks ago, we heard the story of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned ordinary well water into 150 gallons of the finest wine. It was an extraordinary transformation, and it showed the great and joyful abundance that is present whenever Jesus appears. Now consider the extraordinary transformation that Jesus offers to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who comes to Jesus by night. Nicodemus, who receives Jesus' invitation to be born again.

Nicodemus is a religious leader, which means that he is a lot like us. Today, he would probably be on the Board of Trustees, keeping the assets of the church, its buildings and its finances, in good shape. He is someone who has invested himself in the church all his life, and, like us, he also genuinely wants to learn more about Jesus and God's Kingdom. So, he comes to Jesus respectfully. But he also comes by night.

The contrast of light and darkness is a recurring theme in the Gospel of John, and it is important in this story, too. Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the gospel tells us. And "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Coming by night means Nicodemus is coming secretly. He wants to know about Jesus, but it might hurt his reputation to be seen with him. Coming by night also means Nicodemus is quite literally "in the dark" about Jesus. He is clueless.

But he is also so earnest. He wants to know about God, and he thinks Jesus will have the answers he seeks, even if he is nervous to be seen with him. So, Nicodemus starts with a compliment for Jesus, like you do when you are

introducing yourself to an important person. He says, "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." But Jesus skips right past this compliment to what Nicodemus really wants to know about. Jesus says, "To see the Kingdom of God, you have to be born from above."

To understand this response, you have to know that ANOTHEN, the Greek word meaning "from above," also means "again." Jesus says, "You have to be born from above," and Nicodemus can only hear the other meaning of this word. He hears, "You have to literally be ... born ... again." He doesn't get what Jesus is saying.

This happens over and over again in the Gospels. Jesus tries to explain God who is infinite, God who is Spirit, in concrete terms that people can understand. But they get confused because they only hear the literal meaning. In this case, Jesus is telling Nicodemus not to be physically born again, which Nicodemus points out is impossible. No, Jesus is saying, if you receive the Spirit of God, your life will be transformed. You will be living in the Kingdom of God – not later, but right now. You came here to learn ABOUT the Kingdom of God. I'm telling you, you can EXPERIENCE the Kingdom of God yourself. You can be IN it, right now. But that requires you to be transformed. And this is a transformation that Nicodemus cannot imagine, any more than we can, actually.

Born again. New life. It is not something you can accomplish. It is something you receive. New life does not come from acting like a nicer person or from learning more or from working harder, though it may grow in you through regular prayer

and Bible study and worship. New life comes from being aware that you live in the loving presence of God and offering to God the next day of your life, the next hour, this very minute, and then letting the Spirit of God, what one writer called the Wild Child of the Trinity, take over. It can take you to places you never imagined.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, was there at the beginning of all Creation. It was through him that God spoke the universe into being. It was through Jesus Christ that all life was created. The Gospel says, "All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." All the life we know right now comes to us as a gift of God through Christ Jesus. Hope and joy come from God. We can trust that same Spirit who created all life in the first place, to breathe new life right now into the deadest places of our lives, bringing a transformation that is as amazing as turning water into wine.

We all know where the dead places are in our lives. Earlier in this hour, in our prayer of confession, we named in silence the things in our lives that need to change. I don't know what your list is, but I can imagine – a toxic job situation, a financial crisis that is overwhelming, a relationship that isn't working, a health problem you can't control, or one you could manage if you set your mind to it at last, grief over a great loss, regret over some past choice that can't be taken back. The list you prayed about is hanging out there now, suspended between us and God. And God offers new life in precisely those places in our hearts.

When we stop avoiding the dead spaces of our lives, when we take God's hand and go with God to those places, when we give them over God, we will find

new life growing in us, just there – like the gnarly old root of a rose bush that was cut down years ago and now has a little sprout growing from it. God brings life to the dead places in us. And whenever Jesus appears in this world, he brings great and joyful abundance where we need it most.

We cannot live our lives over again from the beginning. But by the grace of God, we can live all the rest of our lives in the hope and joy and abundance of new life from above.

This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen