



If you were to ask me about a particularly dark time in my life when I needed help moving back into the light of day, when I needed a rebirth, I'd have to tell you it was after "The Accident". I know I've told this story before, but I'd have to tell it again because telling it again is part of the rebirth of coming out of the darkness into the light for me. It wasn't so much about surviving the collision, the power of the impact, the totaling of the truck or even somehow walking away without a scratch. The movement from darkness back into light began three months later when, with the help of a counselor, I began to come back to life. I began to see things in new ways and hear things I hadn't heard before. It was like an emotional "thawing" was taking place and I began feel again. I was experiencing renewal, regeneration, restoration. I was being reborn. I was being born again.

Since the beginning of the year we've been in a worship series called "Taste and See." We've been talking about our spiritual hunger, and the practices that feed our souls and deepen our connections with God; practices such as worship and prayer, reading scripture and discerning the will of God. We've explored what new vision and new calling means for our lives. Today we're digging into what it means to become a new creation. I want to talk about this movement from darkness to light and how, as the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us, we can—to use a familiar phrase, be born again ... and again and again. And I want to talk about how all of that is rooted in the grace and love of our God who went to extravagant lengths to show us love in Jesus Christ.

There's a story in John's Gospel that illuminates this. No pun intended, but John's story of Jesus' nighttime visit with Nicodemus throws all kinds of light on what it means to become a new creation; or, to use John's words, be "born again." In our culture the phrase "born again" carries a bit of baggage. Many of us remember how the Jesus movement in the late 20th century used the phrase "Born Again" to

refer to an experience of spiritual renewal and rebirth in a person's life. In the early 1970s many of the people in the movement, known as "Jesus freaks" or "Jesus people," embraced the spiritual practices of another spiritual movement that began in the early 20th century. But all of it went back to the 1st century, to a conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. This story also sets up what is probably the most quoted, dearly beloved and best known verse in the whole bible: John 3:16. The story of Nicodemus and Jesus has been sliced and diced every which way. But like Nicodemus who was facing his own journey from darkness to light, from the way things were to the way things could be, each one of us will have to come to grips with what this story of rebirth means for us. I want to read the passage and then peel back a few layers, draw some conclusions and then provide us with a way of bringing this to life in each of us. [Read John 3:1-10; 16-17] There's a lot going on in this ancient story, but I want to pull out three things that are so relevant that when we see them at work in our own lives, rebirth can happen.

First, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night; Jesus met Nicodemus in his darkness.

In the Gospel of John, the themes of night and day, darkness and light, birth, death and rebirth are vitally important. In this story, darkness points to Nicodemus's ignorance and misunderstanding, maybe even his disbelief. So when Nicodemus comes to Jesus "at night" we know that he's "in the dark" about some things. For all of the degrees and awards on the wall in his office, in spite of all of the mission trips and lock-ins he been on, and even in spite of all the bible studies he's been to and devotional books he's read, Nicodemus is still in the dark. He knows a lot about religion, but he doesn't know what the religion is about. If we're honest with ourselves, the same can be true for us as well. We can easily substitute religion for a real relationship with Jesus. It's easy to think that if we keep busy doing "Christian things," then that's all that matters.

But what this nighttime visit illuminates for us is that where religion ends, Jesus begins. While religion provides all of the motions to go through, none of that will create any kind of living that leads to any kind of rebirth. So that's the first takeaway: Jesus meets us in our darkness. We've all got our darkness, don't we? The darkness of fear, the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of pride, the darkness that keeps us from growing into the light of renewal and rebirth. I had to

deal with my own darkness: afraid to go out, afraid to drive, afraid to take a risk, afraid to accept that I couldn't figure it out on my own; afraid to set my pride aside and go ask for help. Jesus met me in my darkness and the spirit gently blew me toward a counselor who helped me see and understand some things that I couldn't see or understand. And slowly, over time, the darkness began to be replaced with light. And that's when I started feeling like I was coming back to life. Are you in the dark about something? Need some help with something you just can't figure out? Nicodemus went to Jesus. So can you. The promise from John is that Jesus will meet you in your darkness and will begin creating new life in you.

SECOND, JESUS SAID "YOU MUST BE BORN FROM ABOVE, BORN ANEW, BORN AGAIN. Nicodemus was a sharp cookie. When it came to knowing the scriptures, he was at the top of his game. As a highly respected member of the first-century religious community, Nicodemus was an expert in everything pertaining to the Law of Moses. Like a 21st century Supreme Court Justice, Nicodemus knew all 613 Jewish laws, their interpretations and nuances inside-out. Even Jesus recognized him "a teacher of Israel" and an accomplished scholar in Jerusalem.

To his credit, though, it's safe to say that Nicodemus wasn't so 'in-the-dark' as to have misunderstood Jesus' words about being born again in a simplistically literal sense. He knew Jesus wasn't talking about being physically reborn. But beyond that, he wasn't sure and Jesus knew it.

But in spite of all of that, Nicodemus knew something was missing in life. Jesus talks about rebirth as beginning again, going back to the basics, starting over, even becoming a child again. How many times in all of the stories where Jesus talks about the kingdom of God does Jesus invite a child into the circle, saying something like, "Hey, see this kid here? Be like this little girl, have the child-like curiosity of this little boy. Being born again and again and again, and live into the kingdom with the wide-eyed, hope-filled, expectant wonder of these children." The challenging part of all of this, of course, is that we want to figure out how to do that; come up with a plan, nail down a formula for being reborn. If I do this, that or those things I'll be reborn. Here's what we know: being born again is the spirit's work in us, not our own work. Being born again (and again) is not the result of any effort on our part now any more than it was the result of any effort on our part the first time around. Being born again acknowledges the Spirit's presence in us now and invites our openness to the oxygen of the Spirit breathing through us. Being born from above is to expect that God will keep the promise to breathe life into us and bring us from darkness into the light of life.

John 3:16. Here's how I learned it: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." These are beautiful, powerful words of grace and love. But somehow that beautiful verse got tied to the idea that God had some plan to intentionally send his son to be condemned and killed in my place for stuff I'd done and left undone; things I thought, said and left unsaid. And suddenly the profound gift of God's grace didn't feel so much like a gift at all. That's probably because John 3:16 is only half of what Jesus is saying. Here's the second part: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, God sent his son, Jesus into the world in order that the world might be rescued and saved through him. John 3:16 isn't about Jesus' death at all.

When Jesus talks about being born again in the kingdom of God, in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is talking about a new way of ordering things. He's not just talking about nice moral teachings, although there is that; he's not just talking about an ethical standard, although there is that; Jesus is calling Nicodemus into a new way of being, a new way of living where heaven and earth meet and something entirely new takes place by the power of the spirit. I've never, ever talked to anyone who told me that religion set them free or even breathed new life into them. On the other hand, I've talked with countless people and experienced it myself how being born again and again and again is to live and move with the breath of the spirit powering our lives.

John 3:16 is about an extravagant invitation to come out of the darkness and step into the light of a fuller, more whole way of life. It's a way of living that brings us out of darkness into life! It's a life that calls us out of the darkness into the light. It's a life that shows us a love that gives beyond measure, that finds us in our darkness, that welcomes our doubt and turns it into wonder, that acknowledges our not-knowing and turns it into an adventure of being known. It's a life that shows us that love isn't about what I need to do to be loved by God, but about how God dares to believe in and love us.