



Advent 2016

Sermon Transcript December 4, 2016

The Amen of Christmas Jesus: You Must be Born Again John 3:1-15

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 4, 2016 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
John 3:1-15

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Introduction

Last Sunday we began our Advent Series we are calling “The Amen of Christmas.” In introducing this series, we observed that there are twenty-five times in the Gospel of John where Jesus says, *“Truly, truly, I say to you.”* The word that is translated “truly” is the Hebrew word “amen.” So whenever Jesus uses these “double amen” sayings, he is confirming something to be true and he is wanting us to pay special attention to it.

Last week we looked at the first of these “double amen” statements found in John 1:51 where we heard Jesus saying, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”* In the context of this passage, Jesus was alluding to the Old Testament story of Jacob’s ladder, the dream Jacob had of a stairway that connected heaven to earth and he saw angels ascending and descending upon this stairway to heaven. Through this dream, God was assuring Jacob that he would keep his promise to bless him and that God would be with him. And so Jesus is saying through this statement, that he is the stairway, he is the link between heaven and earth. He is the promise of God’s blessing to us and the assurance of God’s presence with us. In fact, he is “the place” where we meet God.

This morning we are in John 3:1-15 and in this passage we find three of the twenty-five “double amen” statements found in the Gospel of John. In John 3:3 we read, *“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”* In John 3:5 we read, *“Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’”* And then down in verse 11, we have the final of these “double amen” statements in this passage where we hear Jesus say, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.”*

This phrase “*born again*” conjures up all kinds of reactions from people. For some it is a term of derision. They refer to those “born-again types” who are deemed a bit too fanatical with their faith. Whether viewed as “fundamentalists” or “evangelicals” they are generally viewed by some to be “simpletons” somewhat out of touch with a progressive culture. And yet for others, this phrase, “born again,” speaks to a profound spiritual awakening or experience that has completely changed their lives.

One such person, was a man by the name of Chuck Colson. His story was told in a book that was called *Born Again*. Colson was Special Counsel to President Nixon and he was caught up in the Watergate scandal that eventually landed him in a brief stint in prison.

As all of this was unraveling, God was in the process of getting ahold of Colson's life. In 2008, he reflected on his conversion to Christ and he called it, *Thirty Five Years in the Light*. Here is part of what he wrote.

"A lot of people have asked me what I think about when I remember back to that hot, humid August night in 1973 when Tom Phillips, then the president of the Raytheon Company, witnessed to me in his home. I left his house that night shaken by the words he had read from C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* about pride. It felt as if Lewis were writing about me, former Marine captain, Special Counsel to the President of the United States, now in the midst of the Watergate scandal. I had an overwhelming sense that I was unclean.

After talking to Tom, I found that when I got to the automobile to drive away, I couldn't. I was crying too hard – and I was not one to ever cry. I spent an hour calling out to God. I did not even know the right words. I simply knew that I wanted Him. And I knew for certain that the God who created the universe heard my cry.

From the next morning to this day, I have never looked back. I can honestly say that the worst day of the last 35 years has been better than the best days of the 41 years that preceded it. That's a pretty bold statement, given my time in prison, three major surgeries, and two kids with cancer at the same time, but it is absolutely true. That's because, for the last 35 years – whether in pain, suffering, joy, or jubilation, it makes no difference – I have known there was a purpose. I have known that I belong to Christ and that I am here on earth to advance His Kingdom."¹ See, to Colson, the phrase *born again* speaks to a wonderful life altering and life changing experience.

While there may be various reactions to the phrase *born again*, there can be no doubt from our passage this morning how Jesus feels about this concept. Did we not just hear verse 3, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" Later in verse 7, he says to Nicodemus, "*Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'*" Jesus speaks rather emphatically about this new birth we call being "born-again." And it is more than just a passing statement in the Gospel of John. It becomes a predominant theme throughout the rest of the New Testament.

John, in this letters at the end of the New Testament, writes often of those who are "*born of God.*" In 1 John 4:7 he writes, "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*" Peter writes, in 1 Peter 1:3, "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he*

has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.” Paul uses other words to describe the idea of being *born again*. For example, he uses the word “*new creation*.” He says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*” He also uses the word “*regeneration*” to describe this concept Jesus is talking about in John 3. In Titus 3:5, Paul says that God “*saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit.*” Wayne Grudem says the word “*regeneration is the secret act of God in which he imparts spiritual life.*”² That is, we are born of God.

So before we even look at this conversation Jesus had with a man by the name of Nicodemus, we can make two preliminary conclusions about this phrase “*born again*.” First of all, it speaks to a transformation of life. D. A. Carson writes, “The new birth is a powerful regeneration, by God himself, in the human life, such that those who have been born again are necessarily transformed.”³ It is more than just making a decision for Jesus or a profession of faith. It is an act of God whereby, our lives have been changed.

And secondly, the tone of Jesus leaves no wiggle room. “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. . . . Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’*” George Whitefield was a famous evangelist during the Great Awakening in the 1700’s. He was known for his booming voice that could speak to thousands without amplification. Nathan Cole wrote in 1740, “One morning, all of a sudden, about 8:00 or 9:00 there came a messenger that said Mr. Whitfield preached at Hartford and Wethersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning at 10:00.” He was out in the field when he got this message and dropped everything and gathered his family and joined an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 who gathered along the river to hear Whitfield that day. As he listened, he said, “by God’s blessing, my old foundation was broken up and I became convinced that my righteousness could not save me.”⁴ Again and again, Whitfield spoke from this text, “You must be born again.” So frequently was this his message that one listener got a little irritated with him and asked, “Mr. Whitefield, why is it that you keep preaching again and again, ‘You must be born again. You must be born again?’” Whitfield looked at him and said, “Because sir, you must be born again.”⁵

So with this in mind, let’s listen in on this conversation Jesus has in the night with a man by the name of Nicodemus. What is the new birth? Where does the new birth come from? How can I be born again?

What is the new birth?

In John 3, we get to listen in on a private conversation held between Jesus and a man by the name of Nicodemus. In fact, Nicodemus is the one who initiates this conversation with Jesus. When we meet him in verse 1 we discover that Nicodemus is a powerful man in Israel. He is a Pharisee, and so he is a religious leader who works really hard at keeping the law of God and the traditions that had been established by this religious elite. He is also identified as “*a ruler of the Jews*” and so he is one of the seventy members of the Sanhedrin who ruled over the people of Israel while under the Roman government. He is a religious leader and a political leader all wrapped up in one.

We discover in verse 2 that he comes to Jesus “*by night*.” There is a lot of speculation as to why Nicodemus had this conversation cloaked in secrecy. We know that this is at the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus. Recently, Jesus had just performed his first public miracle of turning the water into wine. Jesus then made his way south to Jerusalem and his first public act was going into the temple and overturning the tables of the moneychangers. He actually made a whip and chased the moneychangers out of the temple because of the way they were taking advantage of the worshipers. We then read at the end of John 2 that “*many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing*.” John uses the word “*signs*” in his Gospel to refer to the miracles of Jesus. And so did Nicodemus come to Jesus by night because he was protecting his reputation as a respected teacher and leader? Here he is coming to this previously unknown figure from a lowly town in Galilee somewhat curious about this Jesus. Or is there another reason?

I am intrigued by something D. A. Carson says about this visit at “*night*.” He said that John is doing more than just identifying the time of day when they had this secret conversation. He observes that “light” and “darkness” represent a theme that John uses throughout his Gospel. For example in John 1, when Jesus is introduced to us, we read, “*In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*” In fact, later in our chapter this morning, John 3:19-20, this theme of spiritual light and darkness is picked up again where we read, “*the light has come into the world, but people loved the darkness rather than the light.*” Carson says, “If that is what is going on here, then the text is saying that when Nicodemus came to Jesus, doubtless during the night, he came with a certain kind of lostness.”⁶ The irony John points out by this statement is that this religious leader and *teacher of Israel* was actually in spiritual darkness, “*the night*,” when he came to Jesus.

Now I believe that Nicodemus was blind to his own spiritual darkness and need. After

all, he was a religious leader and *the teacher of Israel*. He is the one who is supposed to be “in the light.” But the darkness of his heart is revealed in his first interchange with Jesus. He says to Jesus, “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.*” I already mentioned that John calls the miracles of Jesus, “*signs.*” At the end of the Gospel of John, John 20:30, John says, “*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book.*” In other words, Jesus did a lot of miracles that John never mentions. In fact, John only tells us in detail about seven of the miracles of Jesus. But then he says this, “*but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*” So these miracles were *signs* that point to Jesus being the Christ, the Messiah. And if he is indeed the Messiah, then the kingdom of God has come.

And so Nicodemus comes to Jesus, having seen these “signs” performed by Jesus and he concludes that Jesus is from God. It is as if he is saying to Jesus, “we have been sitting around talking about these miracles you have been doing and we, whoever “we” happens to be, have concluded that you are from God and perhaps even the long awaited kingdom of God is upon us.” It is an insight into Jesus that Nicodemus claims to have discerned. And Jesus turns to him and says, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” In other words, “Nicodemus, you think you see spiritual truth, but you can’t see apart from the supernatural work of God. These things can’t be discerned by human reason. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*” Or as Jesus says of the crowds in Mark 4:12, “*they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand.*” How many times did the crowd “see the miracles” but not really see the truth? You can’t see anything apart from being born again.

I think Nicodemus was somewhat staggered by what Jesus said. And so Nicodemus responds and says, “*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*” This comes across as a rather silly statement and often Nicodemus is ridiculed for being somewhat ridiculous for suggesting that when Jesus spoke about being “born again” he was talking about reliving your physical birth. I think Nicodemus actually understood what Jesus was saying, but he was perplexed as to how Jesus could make it happen. When Jesus said that a person needs to be born again, he is saying that we need a complete makeover and we need to be made into new people. I think Nicodemus looked at Jesus and couldn’t understand how Jesus could deliver on this promise. There is one thing Nicodemus new about life, that many of us understand, you don’t get a “redo” in life. There is no “reset” button to push. You can’t wind back

the clock and relive the day. Oh at times, we look back and say, “If I had to do it all over again, I would do it differently.” But you can’t go back and redo it. There are no “mulligans” in life. What has been done has been done. Who you are is who you are. Where I came from is where I came from and I can’t change that. At times, I will lay down at night with regret, wishing I could go back to when I got up so I could approach the day differently. But I can’t. And so Nicodemus is looking at Jesus and saying, this is absurd, you can’t change who you are. Surely you can’t go back into your mother’s womb and do it all over again. How can one possibly be made into a new person?

Jesus said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”* There is some debate as to what Jesus means when he says *“unless one is born of water and the Spirit.”* I believe the clue to understanding this statement is found in verse 10 when he says to Nicodemus, *“Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things.”* This would suggest that whatever *“born of water and the Spirit”* refers to it would be rooted in the Old Testament. In other words, if Nicodemus is a student and teacher of the Scriptures, he should know how a person is made new. He should know that the prophet Ezekiel said of this day in Ezekiel 36:25-27, *“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses . . . I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you . . . And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”* In other words, Nicodemus, to be born again means that God comes and cleanses us from our sin and God empowers us to live a new life. This is what Paul means by *the washing of regeneration*. It is the secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us.

You are right Nicodemus, you can’t go back in time and hit the reset button and redo what you regret. Jesus knows that Nicodemus is a man of the law and he is working hard to make himself presentable to God. But no amount of good works can make him alive unto God. Rather, it is through the new birth that comes from God, one can be cleansed of your past and you can be made into a new person as the Spirit of God transforms your life. That is what it means to be born again.

The Bible tells us that in our sins we are dead spiritually. We are like a battery in a car that is out of juice. You go to turn the car on and there is nothing. Along comes AAA and they bring jumper cables and hook it up to that dead battery. From outside of that dead battery comes a current that brings it “to life.” So it is with regeneration. We are dead in our sin and through an act of God, we are born anew. As Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:3, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy,*

he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.” It is through this act of God that we can see the kingdom of God and are able to enter the kingdom of God.

Where does this new birth come from?

You may say, “well where does this new birth come from?” Jesus says in verse 6, “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*” That is like saying, dogs give birth to dogs and cats give birth to cats. We are all born of the flesh and in doing so, we are all born into sin. It comes rather natural to us. I didn’t have to be taught how to do wrong. And so consequently, in order for us to be alive unto God, we need to be born of the Spirit. There needs to be an act of the Spirit of God that brings us to life. Carson says it this way, “You are not going to create a moral revolution by merely trying harder or through selective breeding. What you really must have is what Ezekiel said: an act of God that does truly clean you up and that actually fills you with power from God himself, from his Spirit, so that we are changed, transformed.”⁸ And so Jesus says, “*Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’*” Why? Flesh give birth to flesh and the Spirit gives birth to the spirit.

He likens this work of the Spirit to the wind. “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.*” Jesus is saying that there is some mystery to this work of the Spirit in the lives of people. You don’t see where the wind starts or stops. But what you do see is the effect of the wind. You see the leaves blowing and the trees swaying and the flags swirling . . . and for some, the hair being tossed by the wind. That is true on the spiritual end of things. We don’t always understand how and when the Spirit moves, but we do see the effect of the Spirit of God in the lives of people. When God starts to get ahold of the life of a person, the transformation is powerful. Colson went from being known as Nixon’s “hatchet man” to a man with compassion for the prisoner. He went from a deep sense of being unclean before God to being completely cleansed of all his sin. He went from being someone who was tossed back and forth by his circumstances to someone who could not be shaken by the uncertainties of life. Why is that? He was born of God and his life was transformed by God. You could see the effect of the Spirit’s work in his life. “*So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*”

This has significant ramifications for the church as we seek to be salt and light to the world. We desperately want others to be born again. We are responsible to proclaim the good news of Jesus to this world. But ultimately, we depend on God to move.

Therefore, the most strategic thing we can do as a church is pray. Sadly, it is often the last thing we do. But does not Psalm 127:1 say “*Unless the LORD build the house, those who build it labor in vain.*”

A Christian radio station in Houston started something called “Pray Down at High Noon.” Christians all over the city, set the alarms on their phone for noon everyday. And wherever they were, they paused and simply prayed the Lord’s Prayer. One person gave testimony to being out for lunch and simultaneously, heard about fifteen phones chime with the reminder to pray. Terry Teykl, who came up with this idea, writes, “when I see headlines in the *Houston Chronicle* that read “Violent Crime on Decline” or “Murder Rate has Dropped in Houston” - and for no inexplicable reason . . . I would like to credit the power of God coming down and in answer to the Lord’s Prayer.⁹ There was a revival in 1857 called the Fulton Street Revival and it started with six people praying at noon and within months, people were gathering in churches up and down the east coast and it spawned a missions movement that landed in Korea.

If we long to see the wind of the Spirit move in the hearts of people, I can’t think of a better thing to do than to call the church to pray. Set your phones to go off at noon and simply pause and take 21 seconds to pray the Lord’s Prayer. You may even add to that prayer our five affirmations in our way of life: that God would help you love him and love others, that you would be filled with the Spirit, that you would live with the conviction that God is at work in you, that you would maintain unity in the body and that you would invest your life in the work of the kingdom of God. May the wind of the Spirit blow!

How can I be born again?

I wonder if the “wind of the Spirit” is blowing in your life this morning. Perhaps, you have been sensing the tug of the Spirit of God for some time. If so, you should be asking, “How can I be born again?” Jesus closes out this passage by calling you to look to him and live. In John 3:14, Jesus says, “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*”

Jesus is referring to a story from the Old Testament, in Numbers 21. The people of Israel had been complaining against God, which led to an act of judgment. Many fell victim to the deadly bite of a snake and as the people cried out to God for mercy, Moses was told to make a bronze serpent and to put it on a pole. Those who looked to the pole when bitten would live. Alluding to this, Jesus points us to the cross. This is why he came. In

Mark 10:45 the Divine Son of God said, *“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.”* At Christmas, we cannot look at the manger without looking at the cross. He was born to die for us and to take our punishment so that we could be cleansed of our sin.

How can I be born again? Jesus said, *whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* Look to Jesus and live! Repent of your sin. You can’t make yourself new. You can’t hit the reset button and start over. But even if you could, you would still make a mess of things and not love God as you should, nor would you love others. You very possibly would repeat the very same things you did the first time, or simply have a whole new list of regrets. Why? Flesh gives birth to flesh. *You must be born again.* Only that which is born of the Spirit can see and enter the kingdom of God. So respond by turning in faith to Jesus. The very next verse puts it simply, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

What is the new birth? It is the act of God, whereby, he cleanses us of our sin and empowers us to live a new life unto him.

Where does this new birth come from? It comes from the supernatural work of the Spirit of God in your life.

How can I be born again? Look in faith to Jesus. This gift is given to us through believing in Jesus. It is by faith in Jesus we are saved.

¹Chuck Colson, “Chuck Colson Reflects On His Conversion.” <https://descant.wordpress.com>, August 23, 2008

²Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 699

³D. A Carson *The God Who is There* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010) 123

⁴Nathan Cole, “The Great Awakening Comes to Wethersfield, Connecticut: Nathan Cole’s Spiritual Travels” www.historymatters.gmu.edu

⁵Carson, 131

⁶Ibid., 126

⁷Other possible interpretations include:

1. Water equals physical birth and Spirit equals spiritual birth
2. Water equals water baptism and Spirit equals spiritual baptism
3. Water equals “the Word” and the Spirit is “the Spirit”

⁸Carson, 130

⁹Terry Teykl “Lord’s Pray at High Noon” www.goodnewsmag.org, November 18, 2015

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Where were you born and how many siblings did you have?
2. If you could approach Jesus with a question, what would you ask?
3. What insight did you gain from this week's sermon?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read John 3:1-5 and discuss what it means to be born again. How would you explain it to someone?
Read also Ezekiel 36:25-27; Titus 3:4-7; 1 Peter 1:3-5; 2 Corinthians 5:17
5. Read John 3:6-8. Here the Spirit of God is compared to the blowing of the wind. While you can't see the wind, you can see the effect of the wind. What are the visible signs of the work of the Spirit of God in the life of a person? See also 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7

What kind of impact or transformation has Jesus made on your life?

6. Read John 3:14-15. What do you learn about evangelism from this passage?

Taking It Home

7. Reflecting on your discussion about what it means to be born again, how does this lead you to pray for people?
8. Share one thing you are taking from your discussion.