

# OUR PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH: REBIRTH

John 3:1-17

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
February 17, 2008*

Did you make any New Year's resolutions this year? If you did, have you managed to keep them? Or are you like the person who told me that she gave up her New Year's resolutions for Lent? I always have trouble keeping my resolutions, and perhaps you've had the same experience. Our intentions are good, but our actions do not keep pace with our intentions.

That's the same problem Nicodemus had. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus was committed to keeping every point of the Jewish law. The Pharisees believed they could earn God's favor by obeying the law, so they dedicated their lives to keeping not just the Ten Commandments, but also every minute law in the footnotes and the small print.

But as another Pharisee, the apostle Paul, tells us, the Pharisees were not succeeding in keeping the law. Paul says in Romans, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:15, 18-19). Paul's actions, like ours, did not keep pace with his intentions.

When Nicodemus came to see Jesus, he came as a Pharisee dedicated to obeying the law. But he also surely came as a frustrated Pharisee like Paul, aware of his inability to keep the law in spite of his good intentions. Nicodemus had surely experienced the same kind of disillusionment that Paul experienced, and that we experience when we discover that we can't keep our New Year's resolutions. Perhaps Nicodemus had realized the futility of attempting to keep the law in order to earn God's approval.

Nicodemus was convinced that Jesus was a teacher sent from God. So Nicodemus came to see Jesus, possibly to see whether Jesus might have some helpful hints on how to live by the law so as to achieve God's favor. Maybe Nicodemus wondered whether Jesus might have written a self-help book for frustrated Pharisees on how to keep the law without losing your sanity. The conversation that followed between Nicodemus and Jesus is a strange conversation of misunderstanding and double meanings, but it is very revealing and instructive. Nicodemus begins by complimenting Jesus on his signs and wonders. Jesus answers by saying, in effect, that the signs and wonders are not really all that important, but what is important is that a person be born from above.

Now the Greek word that is translated "from above" has two meanings. On the one hand, it can mean "from above" or "from God." On the other hand, it can mean "again" or "a second time." Jesus intends the first meaning, "born from above" or "from God." But Nicodemus misunderstands and latches on to the second meaning, "born again." Thus, Nicodemus asks for clarification, because by this time he is thoroughly confused, thinking that Jesus is saying that a person has to be born physically a second time in order to get into the kingdom of heaven.

But there is more to Nicodemus's question than just confusion. His question also reflects his yearning for some answers about how to achieve this rebirth that Jesus is talking about. Nicodemus wants to change his life, but he doesn't think it is possible. He sees the desirability of change, but he questions its possibility.

Nicodemus is saying to Jesus, in effect, "I know that it's necessary for a person to undergo a radical, fundamental change in order to be set right with God, but in my experience it's impossible to do that. There's nothing I would like more than to be able to obey the law and do the things that are pleasing to God, but I know that I can't. You might as well tell me to enter my mother's womb and be born all over again."

We can hear Nicodemus's frustration coming through as he gives an example of something equally impossible. Here is a conscientious Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, who has tried all of his life to do what is pleasing to God, only to experience day after day the sense of frustration that comes from continued failure. He wants to do what is right, but he can't. He wants to change, but he cannot change himself.

Doesn't that sound familiar to us? Isn't that also our experience? We make New Year's resolutions because we see the need for change in our lives, but within a few days most of us begin to experience the frustration of wanting to change but not being able to.

I know that some of us want to lose weight, and some of you may want to quit smoking. Perhaps you have tried and failed, and you know the frustration of wanting to lose weight or quit smoking, but not succeeding. Or some of you may drink too much or may be dependent upon alcohol, and you may want to break that dependency, but you can't seem to do it.

Or some of you may want to start reading the Bible and praying every day, but you can't seem to manage to make time in your busy schedule for daily devotions. Or some of you may want to change something about your personality---you may want to become more assertive or outgoing, or more patient or tolerant, or more open, or less judgmental. But if you've ever tried to change a personality trait, you know how difficult it is to do that.

Or some of you may want to develop a better relationship with your spouse and get out of the ruts that are causing friction or boredom in your marriage, but you have discovered that it's easy to see the need for change in a marriage, but very difficult to bring it about.

Or some of you may want to develop a better relationship with your parents or with your children.

What are we to do if there are things about ourselves or our lives that we want to change, but we can't seem to do it? If effecting the change seems as impossible as re-entering our mother's womb and being born all over again, what are we to do? That's the question Nicodemus had for Jesus.

Notice Jesus' answer. Jesus says, "You must be born from God. You must be born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." The birth from water that Jesus mentions could refer to baptism, but what seems more likely in this context is a reference to the physical birth process when the mother's water breaks and the baby is literally born of water.

Jesus says that Nicodemus has already been born of water. Now Nicodemus needs to be born of the Spirit. Being born of water is a given for all human beings; it is the way in which we come into this physical world.

But being born of the Spirit is an option offered to us once we arrive in this world. This spiritual rebirth is not necessary for our physical life on earth, but it is necessary for our spiritual life and for our entry into God's realm. Being born anew from God is the necessary first step of becoming a Christian, so all Christians are born-again Christians. To be a Christian, by definition, is to have experienced a spiritual rebirth, either through a sudden conversion or through a life-long process of nurturing.

Jesus then tells Nicodemus about how this spiritual rebirth is accomplished. Jesus compares the Spirit with the wind. Now you may know that in both Greek and Hebrew the same word means both "wind" and "spirit." And in this passage in John, Jesus compares the wind and the Spirit in a word-play that is lost in the English translation, but which Nicodemus would certainly have understood.

Jesus says that we cannot control the working of the Spirit any more than we can control the wind. In other words, there is nothing that we can do to control or achieve or earn this birthing by the Spirit. Our spiritual rebirth comes only from God through God's grace. Abundant and eternal life is a gift from God and is not based in any way on any achievement of ours. Nicodemus the Pharisee needed to hear that message that salvation is through God's grace alone, not by our obedience to the law.

But we also need to be reminded of that truth, especially during Lent, when some of us are tempted to think that our spiritual discipline or sacrifice will earn God's favor. No amount of prayer or fasting or adherence to rules will earn us a place in God's realm. The Spirit blows where it chooses, and when we are reborn by the Spirit, it is God's gift to us. We can, however, be open to the working of the Spirit in our lives.

Like the wind, the Spirit symbolizes power. To be reborn by the Spirit means that the Spirit enters our lives and empowers us to become what by ourselves we could never be and to do what by ourselves we could never do. The Spirit gives us the power to change both ourselves and our actions.

So through the power of the Spirit, we can change those things about ourselves that we don't like. Through the power of the Spirit, we can keep the Ten Commandments, not to earn our salvation, but to glorify God. Through the power of the Spirit, we can live as God intends us to live, loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

So we can keep our New Year's resolutions, not through our own strength, but through the power of the Spirit.

Let us pray. Spirit of God, blow into our lives in the quietness of this moment. If there are those here who have not been reborn by your life-giving Spirit, enter their lives and give them a new birth into your spiritual realm of life eternal. Empower all of us to be who you want us to be and to do what you want us to do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.