



## **“Reborn”**

**Scripture – John 3:1-17**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, March 8, 2020**

Raise your hand if you know someone who has taken ballet classes? Raise your hand if YOU have ever taken ballet classes? (I raise my hand). Now you know something that my linebacker coach at Kansas State never knew! He wanted me to be tough and fierce and to eat running backs for lunch. I surmised that ballet would not have dovetailed with his scheme to sculpt me into a vicious tackler.

Actually, there were seven of us on my high school football team who took ballet for a short time. Our goal was to improve our balance and coordination. We learned to plié and pirouette, but we did not stick with it long enough to learn to spot. This is where the dancer picks a single spot on the wall to focus on while performing numerous turns. “To avoid dizziness, the eyes remain focused on the spot. In each turn, the face whips around at the very last moment to return your stare to the same spot. (This allows the dancer to spin without getting dizzy or nauseated). A flailing arm or a step off balance is a telltale sign that the focal point has been lost.” Ballet instructor and pastor, Amy Zietlow, says that “The demands of life often mimic the whirl of a turn. As we spin through our to-do lists, we can lose sight of the spot that orients our life. That spot is our faith.”<sup>1</sup>

When we drift away from God, and the values of our culture replace the teachings of Jesus, we are in danger of losing our balance and stumbling across the stage of life.

In today’s gospel reading from John, we hear that a religious leader named Nicodemus approached Jesus under the cover of darkness. Why at night? Why not in the light of day? Because the religious leaders of his day viewed Jesus as a dangerous character. He had announced that he was launching a divine revolution intended to transform society. His mission would undermine the power of the ruling authorities by exposing how out of step they were with God. He called for an end to the oppression of the poor declaring that in God’s realm there will be justice and mercy for all. Those who had been pushed to the margins of society will receive engraved invitations to God’s realm. The outcasts will become in-casts.

When Jesus announced: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15) he was not waxing eloquently about God’s heavenly paradise that people would enter after death. He envisioned God’s realm breaking out on earth and he taught his followers to pray a radical prayer that included: “Thy kingdom come on *earth* as it is in heaven.”

The message of Jesus was exceptionally good news for those on the bottom floor of society, but it declared to those living in the penthouse that they were in a precarious position with God and needed to alter their ways.

In every society, those benefiting from the status quo will mightily resist change, and the Pharisees of Jesus' day hardened against him. Jesus was not simply a nuisance, he was a threat to their authority and their privileged position.

However, the Gospel of John informs us that a person of prominence, a religious leader named Nicodemus, broke ranks with his cohorts. Nicodemus was intrigued by Jesus. He was enchanted by the wisdom of Jesus and felt challenged by his teachings. Despite convictions to the contrary and ominous warnings of his friends Nicodemus sensed the Spirit of God in Jesus.

Nicodemus could not pay a visit to Jesus in the daytime, because fellow Pharisees might suspect he was collaborating with the enemy. So Nicodemus went to Jesus after the sun had set. While many of the Pharisees believed Jesus was an emissary of Satan, Nicodemus saw something extraordinary in this rabbi from Nazareth. Nicodemus believed he was a spirit-filled messenger of God. He said to Jesus, "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 did not reply to his inquiry with words aimed at gradually easing Nicodemus into his message. Jesus declared, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being reborn from above."

Nicodemus was puzzled because he took the words of Jesus literally. He responded, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

We know that Jesus was speaking metaphorically. He was saying that no one can perceive God's realm without a spiritual rebirth – a transformation that prompts us to *see* the world differently and to *be* in the world differently. Further, a spiritual rebirth is not a one-time event. God's Spirit frequently attempts to grab our attention and to shake us from stale routines.

How much of our consciousness remains dormant because we move through our days asleep to the wonders around us? I worry that our eyes are locked onto only what can be observed and touched, and the eyes of our soul have grown so dim that they fail to capture opportunities for beauty hovering nearby, waiting to be disclosed. Jesus urged Nicodemus – and he urges us – (as Rainer Maria Rilke puts it) "to strain against the deadening grip of daily necessity."<sup>2</sup> Jesus urges us "to strain against the deadening grip of daily necessity."

Jesus was focused on transformation. He was intent on changing people. He was intent on revamping society. And he hoped to turn the world upside down.

To be born again is to delve into the ways of Jesus and seek the life that is waiting to be lived. When I think of the ways of Jesus—his teachings, his actions, and his interactions with others – the words love and liberation emerge. Jesus lived a radical love that is compassionate, forgiving, and joyful. It was also liberating. Jesus endeavored to free everyone from whatever crippled, whatever enslaved, whatever oppressed. For us to be born again by God's Spirit is to live a life characterized by love and liberation.

To be born again is to open the eyes of our soul so that we might perceive the holiness in each encounter. It could be to behold the beauty that is already present and to allow it to wash over us. It could be an opportunity to extend compassion to one who is hurting. It could be an urgency to counter darkness with light.

Will you dare to allow God's Spirit to stir within you to open your heart, to sharpen your vision and to possibly redirect your path?

It's easy to get caught up in routines, both mindless and imperative, that distance you from God. It's so easy to slide into societal values that are at odds with the life God calls you to live. How can you be reborn from above so that your life is rich and radiant, beautiful and bountiful?

It's not something we can manufacture on our own. There is no step-by-step guide to follow. Jesus says God's Spirit is like the wind, it blows where it chooses and cannot be controlled. However, we can decide whether to be receptive or resistant to God's Spirit. Unfortunately, most of us find the status quo too comforting and we latch onto the security of the known even when it becomes dull and lifeless, rather than risk venturing into the unknown.

By the way, God's Spirit does not bypass you once you join AARP. No matter your age, Christ calls you to be courageous and to pay attention to stirrings in your soul.

Are you experiencing a hard-to-name restlessness within that you need to explore? Are you blocking out God's whispers that are urging you to forge a new path? Could God be nudging you to reassess your priorities? Has the vitality been drained from your life? An invitation to serve people in need may open a door for you. Anger at an injustice may lead you to a renewed sense of purpose. A personal crisis might soften your heart and make you more compassionate to others who suffer. A comment by a friend or a verse of Scripture or a heartfelt prayer might spark an awakening in you.

God may want to get under your skin, into your heart and inside your brain to give birth to something new. Are you open to an adventure?

#### NOTES

1. Amy Zietlow, "A Spot for Lent," *The Christian Century*, March 2, 2020.
2. Rilke, Rainer Maria, *The Book of Hours II*, 12.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

Merciful God — You love the world so dearly that you sent your beloved Son: to teach us your truth, to heal our brokenness, to open the way to eternal life, to make us one with you. So, with boldness, we approach the throne of grace. We come with gratitude, for you rejoice with us in times of delight and weep with us in seasons of sorrow. We come with hope, for you receive us with compassion and turn toward us in love. We come with confidence, for you promise to hear our prayers ... the ones we are able to voice, as well as those that silence draws from our hearts.

Compassionate God — You know our inmost hearts. So, in these quiet moments, we lay bare the pain that plagues us, the worry that consumes us, the grief that overwhelms us. We seek healing for ourselves and for others: for bodies aching from disease, or weary from the toll of daily demands; for minds riddled with invisible illness, or suffering the indignity of dementia; for spirits broken by stress, or heavy with despair. Surround all of us with your comfort, we pray, and breathe your sustaining spirit upon those we name before you in silence: (*Silence*)

Gracious God — Your creation cries out for healing. As we pray for this world in need, break our hearts for what breaks yours. We lift before you tornado-ravaged communities in Tennessee, and pray that your Spirit would sweep over the rubble and draw order out of chaos. We lift before you the growing number of communities affected by the Coronavirus, and pray that your Spirit would comfort the grieving, sustain the sick, and empower caretakers with discerning minds and skillful hands. We lift before you communities near and far whose suffering is not considered newsworthy, but whose pain is no less real. Send your healing spirit upon these neighbors, and upon those we name before you in silence: (*Silence*)

Ever-Present God — You are no stranger to suffering. But — as the empty tomb gives witness — you do *not* let suffering have the final word. Dwell with us, we pray. Mend our brokenness; refresh our spirits. As we pray for healing, align our wills with *your* will, so that the story we tell with our lives may be a story of grace. By your Spirit — strengthen us, guide us, renew us, until our prayers give way to action, and our actions plant seeds of peace. Draw us into your work, O God, and shape our petitions into prophetic words— words that invite transformation and offer reconciliation.

Hear us now as we join our voices to offer the prayer Christ taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**