

# Reborn!

## The Journey from Darkness Into Light

John 3:1-21  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Embedded within today's Gospel reading is among the most famous and well-known verses in the entire Bible. In fact, most people know this verse by heart just by hearing it's name, John 3:16.

*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. (NRSV)*

Before we look closer at that famous passage, let's start at the beginning of this story in order to put it into context. A Pharisee, a Jewish religious leader and expert in the laws of Moses, named Nicodemus has come in the dark of night to speak with Jesus. The timing of his visit is no mere narrative flourish. The imagery of contrasting light and darkness runs throughout this gospel. Coming to Jesus "at night," therefore, was meant by the author to make a theological point.

Nicodemus (who some biblical scholars suggest may have been a fictional character meant to represent an element of the religious institution of the gospel writer's day, some 60-70 years after Jesus was executed) was in the dark, spiritually. I want to spend a few moments looking at Nicodemus because he does indeed reflect several characteristics that many progressive Christians today possess.

John Calvin, the theological father of Presbyterianism, himself believed that Nicodemus was a secret disciple of Jesus. Nicodemus's fear of the Jewish religious authorities, of which he was one himself, decided to visit Jesus during the cover of night. Calvin even came up with the name "Nicodemites," to label those in France, where Calvin was born some 500 years ago, who were Reformed and evangelical at heart but Roman Catholics in practice.

Nineteenth century Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard described Nicodemus more of an admirer of Jesus than a follower. But like Calvin, Kierkegaard saw Nicodemus as someone who only partially associated himself with Jesus, but who held back from a full and public commitment to him because of his fear of persecution from his own people. Yet, even Nicodemus recognized that Jesus brought something new and exciting to the understanding of faith and religion. And while that was seen as a threat to traditional Judaism, many others were intrigued enough by what they heard and saw to dabble into this new approach to a life of faith. And that's where I find a connection with many progressive Christians today. Let me explain.

Many of us, and some just very recently, have been introduced to a new perspective of biblical interpretation and theological thought. And yes, just like the ancient Jewish traditionalists, **many modern day Christian traditionalists feel threatened by this new progressive approach to a life of faith. Perhaps not so much out of fear of**

**traditionalists, however, many progressives are afraid of even calling themselves Christians or followers of Jesus because of how so many people in our society today associate the term 'Christian' with a judgmental, intolerant, narrow-minded and engraved-in-granite approach to a life of faith.**

**Therefore, many progressive Christians aren't ready to go public with their interest in Jesus, even to the point of keeping their faith secret – like Nicodemus.** That's why one of my primary goals here at College Hill is to reclaim much of our traditional religious language, including the term 'Christian.' I also want to spread the message that there is more than one way to interpret religious jargon, and that there are places here in Tulsa where progressive Christians can come out – come out of hiding and stop lurking in the shadows. The inaugural Harold E. Hill Lecture Series, just three weeks from tomorrow, is a perfect opportunity for that to happen. And unlike Nicodemus, **perhaps more progressives in this city will be more willing to go public with their commitment to a life of faith modeled by Jesus – to move from the darkness into the light.**

There's another term that needs an extreme makeover is "born again." After Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus has come from God, Jesus answers, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again" (John 3:3 NIV and King James Version). But, as many of you know, the actual Greek word that is used in this verse, *ανωθεν* (anōthen), was intentionally chosen by the author because it has more than one meaning.

Nicodemus goes for the plain, literal meaning of born "**again**," for which he protests that no one can be born a second time from their mother's womb. This passage has become a hallmark for evangelical and many conservative Christians. **One's very status as a Christian, many claim, is based exclusively on having a born "again" conversion experience after a person accepts Jesus into their heart as Lord and Savior.** However, being born "again," can also mean born "**anew**," which carries a much different connotation. For instance, many of us can relate to a way of life in which we feel that we have been born "anew" each day.

This Greek word can also be translated (like in our NRSV pew Bibles) as born "**from above**," which the author has already revealed in Chapter 1 is where he believes Jesus comes from. **In the gospel writer's worldview, God is above us. Since he believes Jesus is God in the flesh come down to earth, Jesus, therefore, had to come "from above."** Another way to say this is that **Jesus came from God's realm, and inaugurated that realm among us in the here and now.**

Jesus tells us, then, that we can only see the kingdom of God if we are born from "above," from the realm of God. Rebirth, then, as in recognizing that we too are from the realm of God, is a spiritual experience available to all, but perhaps most needed by religious people who might think they do not need such a transformation of heart and mind. Biblical commentator Emmanuel Y. Lartey adds:

In fact, to be in tune with God's realm and presence we all need a transformative overhaul of our traditional ways of seeing and being.

We need a transformation of our whole way of knowing and experiencing the world. When this happens, it is as if we have begun life all over again.

That brings us back to the connection with progressive Christianity. I know that **many of us have felt transformed in our life of faith as we have looked beyond the**

**traditional ways of understanding scripture and ancient church doctrine and dogma.** I personally have no problem, therefore, with declaring my own sense of being born again, born anew, born from the realm of God. And when compared to my own understanding of faith and religion when I was young, I indeed feel like I have been reborn! Also, I am not ashamed to call myself a Christian. (Strange you would have to hear a pastor say that from a mainline Christian congregation.)

That brings us up to that famous verse, **John 3:16**. For many, it summarizes the entire gospel message in a nutshell; functioning as a theological reflection upon the meaning of Christ coming into the world. When it comes to interpreting this verse, however, first and foremost **it is about God's action, not ours. It is primarily about God's grace.** By virtue of loving the entire world, God sent us One who would reveal how much we are loved by God. **It is the recognition of that love that transforms lives.**

The God who is revealed in and by Jesus is a God whose love knows no bounds. Recognizing and internalizing this reality can indeed have a transformative effect on our lives in the here and now. **That, in my opinion, is what salvation and being a part of the kingdom of God means. It's what allows us to live life fully, and it reminds us that the imagery of eternal life in the Gospel of John is as much or more about the 'here' as it is about the 'hereafter'.**

**Salvation, when understood this way, is not an intellectual, or even emotional, acceptance of doctrinal statements that theologians (including the gospel writers) believed about God and Jesus.** For we are told in verse 17 that God sent the One named Jesus not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. In this story, the message that cries out is one of acceptance: **God's acceptance of us.** This message is so important that **it** lies at the heart of the second bullet point of our congregation's Mission Statement: **"Receive and openly share the love of God."**

There are many people in our society today, perhaps even yourself at times, for which self-acceptance may be one of life's biggest struggles. At the heart of the gospel, however, is God's acceptance of us. The gospel writer's point in this story is that **God's acceptance of us should and must have an impact on how we view ourselves and our own identity, how we act, how we relate to God and each other, and how we view the world.**

Our world, our very selves, cannot remain the same when we realize that we are loved with a love that will not let us go. Our journey, then, is similar to Nicodemus' in that it is one from darkness to light, to more light. It is a journey of being reborn through the experience that "God so loved the world..."

Amen.

Resource:  
*Feasting on the Word*