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March 12, 2017

**Ashes to Fire, Year A  
With Jesus After Dark**

John 3:1-17

John 7:45-52, 9:39-41, 11:10, 13:30; Matthew 10:32-33

1. **Born Again**

\* **Kingdom of God**  
- Matthew 6:10

\* **Children of God**  
- John 1:12, 14:21

\* **Eternal Life**

\* **Rebirth: Water and Spirit**

2. **Experience the Wind**

3. **Lifted Up**  
- Numbers 21:4-9

4. The **Love of God**

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West Valley Church  
Michael O'Neill

**A2F**  
**Ashes to Fire, Year A**  
**With Jesus After Dark**  
**(John 3:1-17)<sup>1</sup>**

How many of us have been able to use to the “Ashes to Fire” morning and evening meditations so far? Have you enjoyed it? I believe there is something powerful that can happen in our church when we are all reading the same Scripture passages each day. I believe it gives the Holy Spirit a profound platform from which to speak to our entire church, to help us be united in heart and mind and mission. I believe it allows the Spirit to do a work in our church collectively and to lead us collectively to be able to do great and supernatural things in us and through us. So each Sunday from now until the day of Pentecost, which is June 4<sup>th</sup>, our sermon focus will be the Scripture readings for that day.

If I were to ask you what the most famous Scripture from the Old Testament is, what would you say? Probably Psalm 23, or maybe the Ten Commandments. If I were to ask you what the most famous Scripture is from the New Testament, what would you say? John 3:16. We've seen it plastered on billboards, on signs at sporting events, and even used as graffiti. It is the summative passage of the entire Gospel. Every Sunday morning I make it a point to greet you with a paraphrase of that verse. All I am doing is restating Jesus' own words. When I say, 'God loves you as if you were the only person in all the world to love, and that he sent his Son to die on a cross for you, and would've done that if you were the only one in all the world to love,' I'm simply saying, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' John 3:16 is the most well known verse for good reason: it summarizes the entire Gospel, in Jesus' own words.

Maybe you've seen an interview that the athlete Tim Tebow gave when he talked about the interesting impact of a time that he placed “John 3:16” on his eye-black during the national championship in college football. He's repeated this story a couple of times, but this particular time he was on the Harry Connick Jr. show. I think you'll find this interesting: *play video*.

I don't know how you feel about Tim Tebow; if you like sports you probably either love him or hate him. One thing's for sure, Tebow has determined to organize his life around Jesus; he has put his faith in Christ and he appears to live for Christ in all areas of his life. Now, there's nothing magical about a sign that says “John 3:16,” but

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<sup>1</sup> Primary resources are William Barclay, [The Gospel of John](#), Rev. and updated., vol. 1, The New Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), and Faithlife Study Bible, Lexham Press.

if nothing else, it seems that God was writing an exclamation point on how important that verse is.

The passage we are looking at today contains that verse, which took place during a nighttime conversation Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus. This is what the passage says:

“Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.’

Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’

‘How can someone be born when they are old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!’

Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.” The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.’ ‘How can this be?’ Nicodemus asked.

‘You are Israel’s teacher,’ said Jesus, ‘and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.’” (John 3:1-17, niv)

Now, I know what many of you are doing – you are doing the same thing I did when I saw that this was the passage for this morning. I immediately thought, “I’ve heard this passage so many times; I don’t even need to pay attention to what it says.” But then God lovingly spoke to my spirit and reminded me: “This is My Word. It is fresh every moment, it is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword. Don’t dismiss it; listen to it as if you’ve never heard it before.” So I’m passing along to you the advice God gave me: “This is God’s Word. It is fresh every moment, it is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword. Don’t dismiss it; listen to it as if you’ve never heard it before.” If you do, you will discover some very important, life-changing truths, just like I did, all over again, as I prepared for this morning.

In this passage we are brought into a story of a conversation that happens at night between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Jewish leader who is

looking for some answers about Jesus. He confesses that he believes Jesus has come from God, and Jesus takes the opportunity to teach Nic about his need for a spiritual rebirth.

John writes this narrative in a way that allows us to enter into it. He narrates the dialogue back and forth, with each new exchange revealing more. John writes this way so that we can see what Nicodemus and Jesus are thinking, and in the process we are also led into the same thought processes and discoveries.

We don't know a lot about Nicodemus, other than what John tells us. For instance, Nicodemus must have been wealthy; when Jesus died, Nic brought a hundred pounds of burial spices (John 19:39) – only a person with money could do that. We know that he was a Pharisee. These were men who devoted their lives to obeying every single thing in the Jewish religious law. You might think that was admirable, and it was. But it was no small task. The Law was the first five books of the Old Testament. They believed that the Law contained every rule that was necessary for people to obey in order to be acceptable to God. But the rules weren't explicit; they were too general. So the religious leaders created what they called the Talmud, which were all the details to define the laws. For example, the Law says that there should be no work done on the Sabbath. But how do you define work? Could you lift your child up on the Sabbath? So they wrote hundreds of pages with 24 chapters just to explain the Sabbath rules. To tie a knot in a string or rope was work on the Sabbath, so they had to define what kinds of knots and for what purposes. A woman could tie up her skirt, though. So if a man wanted to tie a rope on a bucket to draw water from a well, he couldn't. But if he used a women's skirt, he could. A man couldn't travel more than 1,000 yards from his home on the Sabbath. To carry dentures or a wooden leg was work. So everything from how much water you could carry, to how much first aid you could apply, to every single possible scenario you could conceive of, was recorded in the Talmud. And Nicodemus was an expert on all of that – obeying every single little rule. He was fanatical about his commitment to his religion.

He was also a ruler and member of the aristocracy. He was a part of Jewish rulers called the Sanhedrin. This group had ruling powers over every Jew everywhere in the world (under Roman authority, of course).

All of that also meant that Nicodemus was not supposed to associate with ordinary people – people without papers and credentials.

That is probably why Nicodemus went to Jesus at night; he wanted to know more about Jesus, but he didn't want to risk what he had. Still, Nicodemus defended Jesus when the rest of the Sanhedrin began making plans to arrest him. (John 7:45-52). But Nicodemus didn't want anyone else to know that he followed Jesus. He was afraid to be publicly associated with Jesus. There is a problem with that. Jesus said:

“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 10:32-33, niv)

Keep that in mind as we listen in, and learn from this conversation. You'll understand why Jesus cuts right to the core of things with Nicodemus and addresses his heart problem.

So even before we look at this conversation, we might as well start off with this question: Are you a Nicodemus Christian? Do you sneak around in your Christianity? Do you meet Jesus in Church, or in the quiet of your home, but no one at work or school knows that you are a follower of Jesus? If so, my guess is that Jesus will confront you on your lack of a genuine change of life and heart. And you should be warned; John writes about this visit at night because in his Gospel, darkness is associated with spiritual blindness. Jesus said:

“Those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.”  
(John 11:10, niv)

(See also John 9:39-41; 13:30). So if you are secretive about your faith in Jesus, then you are in the dark about your Christianity, and you may not have a saving faith at all.

Nicodemus secretly approaches Jesus at night, acknowledging that God must be with him because of the miracles that Jesus performs. But Jesus blew right by those comments, making it clear that the signs and miracles are not what is important; but what *is important* is what the signs are pointing *to*: and that is Jesus, and that only Jesus can bring about the change in someone's inner heart and life that can best be described as being:

## 1. ***Born Again***

When Jesus said that a person needed to be born again, Nicodemus misunderstood what Jesus meant. Part of the reason for his misunderstanding might have been because in the Greek, the word “again” can mean three different things: it means “from the beginning, completely and radically,” or it can mean “for the second time,” or it can mean “from above” or “from God.” Jesus meant all three, but Nicodemus was trying to pick one.

We can't get the breadth of those three meanings into our one English word, but they are all three in the meaning. That means that to be “born again” is to go through such a radical change that it's like being born all over again and starting all over again differently, to have something happen to your soul that can only be described as being born all over again, and that the whole thing is not anything you can achieve as a human because it comes only from the grace and power of God. Has that been your experience? Is that the experience that you are currently living in?

If you are not a Christian, are you willing to believe it? For Nicodemus, it wasn't that he didn't desire that kind of change – he really did. He was probably exhausted from trying to obey all those rules. He desired it; he just didn't believe it was possible. Nicodemus represents every person: he was someone who wanted to change but couldn't change himself. Will you believe this change can happen in your life?

Then Nicodemus doesn't so much ask a question as he makes a statement. He isn't saying, "How is that possible?" – he's saying, "That's not even remotely possible." But Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand it, so he patiently explains it, giving us some more details about what it means to be born again. The first is:

### - **Kingdom of God**

Probably our best definition of this term comes from the time that Jesus taught us to pray and told us to pray for it. It's in the Lord's Prayer, and it says:

"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."  
(Matthew 6:10, niv)

It was a characteristic Jewish style to say something was important by stating it twice; once to state it and then a second time to state it in a different way that explains and amplifies the first way. That's what Jesus is doing here. Jesus is saying that we should pray for and seek to live out the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom of God is defined as a society or community where what God wants is done here on earth just like it happens in heaven. So here's one thing it means to be born again – to be a Christian: to be in the Kingdom of God means we lead a life in which we willingly submit everything to the will of God; that our first and only ambition and passion is to live here on earth the priorities and purposes of heaven: reconciled to God, introducing people to Jesus Christ, growing and working in this faith, living our lives for God's purposes in relationships with people and with creation. It is to live in such a relationship with God that we are:

### - **Children of God**

This is an incredible privilege that we are given – to be in such a relationship with God that he is our Father and we can be his beloved child. John tells us:

"To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12, niv)

But at the same time, the essence of that relationship is also one of obedience. Jesus said:

"Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father." (John 14:21, niv)

The essence of our relationship with God is love, and the essence of love is a response of obedience. We can't say we love someone and at the same time do things that go against that person and hurts that person. This privileged relationship is a loving obedience. So the Kingdom of God and being a child of God are the same as being born again.

Then Jesus described being born again as having

### - Eternal Life

I need to explain something here. Jesus is not saying that if you are born again you will live forever. You *already* live forever; every person who ever lived lives forever. It's really only a question of *where* you will live forever. The Bible is abundantly clear: we will live forever either in heaven or in hell. The choice is ours. So Jesus is making two points here: one is that when you are born again you will live forever in heaven. Which is really great news! But it's much more than that; we aren't born again in order to be preserved until heaven, or to just bide our time here until we get to paradise. We already know that the Kingdom of God can be here on earth as it is heaven, so being born again means a quality of life here on earth that is abundant, full of love for God and self and others, full of peace and provision and contentment and joy and all kinds of other heavenly qualities and bringing that everywhere we go. Heaven is a place on earth – in the quality of love and life of those who are reborn – it is a:

### - Rebirth: Water and Spirit

It's important to understand what Jesus is saying here. When Jesus said that we must be born of water and the spirit, he is talking about more than a natural order of things; he's not talking about a physical birth from the womb and then a spiritual birth. That was what Nicodemus was thinking, and that's why he couldn't understand what Jesus was saying.

You see, in the Bible, water represents *cleansing*. When Jesus takes possession of our hearts, all of our sins of the past are forgiven and forgotten. They are gone! We are cleansed of all that sin and we are free! Last Sunday we had a baptism service, and twelve times you got to see the amazing, miraculous representation in the water of baptism of how Jesus cleanses us from sin (*we are doing baptism again!*). But we also must be born of the Spirit, and Spirit represents *power*. This is important. If all Jesus did was forgive our past, then we would just think and act in all the same ways that would lead directly to the same mess we were in before. We would have a sinful life all over again. But after we are cleansed, then by the power of the Spirit, we can begin life with a new power that enables us to *live out* the Christian life; to be what, on our own, we could never be, and to do what, on our own, we could never do. Water and Spirit stand for the cleansing and strengthening power of Christ that wipes out our past and gives victory for our future.

Nic still won't comprehend what Jesus is telling him. It's not that he doesn't understand, he just doesn't want to allow himself to believe it. It's one thing to not completely comprehend the truth; it's another thing to comprehend it but not be willing to accept it. That's where Nic is at. The truth that Jesus offers Nicodemus is amazing; it's too good to pass up! But Nic still won't accept it. It's going to cost him; he'll lose his position as a religious leader, he may lose his aristocratic position. He may even lose his money. He's like a lot of us – when Jesus comes to us and offers to recreate us, we say, “No thank you. I am happy with the way I am; I don't want to change.” So Nic still claims that he doesn't understand, but mostly he's stalling or

trying to put it off – just like we do; just like maybe you are doing right now. But Jesus is always very patient with us and doesn't give up on us, so, being very gracious, he explains it *even more* to Nicodemus. He does so by using an everyday example; he reminds Nicodemus to:

## **2. Experience the Wind**

Nicodemus basically says, "Maybe this kind of life that you are talking about is possible, but I still don't understand how it works." So Jesus explains it in a way that Nic is sure to understand. He uses the word "spirit," which in the Greek language is "pneuma," which is also used for the word "wind." We still use the word that way, right? It's where we get the word "pneumatics" from, which is machinery that works by using air. He says that the Spirit of God is like wind – you know it's there, you can see what it does, even if you don't understand completely where it came from or can't see where it is going. We may not understand how the Holy Spirit works, but the effect of the Holy Spirit on the lives of genuine Jesus followers can't be mistaken! No one can argue against a faith that turns an evil, dark, and sinful person into a loving, caring, good person!

This conversation is a strong message for us: we can sit around in our Bible Studies and classes and study and read books. We can know everything there is to know about the Christian faith and the Bible. But the Christian life is given to us to be *experienced*. It is essential that we experience the power of Christianity! The end result of the Christian faith and life is not an amount of knowledge; it is a transformed life with the power to be free from sinning and to live for God with complete abandonment! We must experience it! Ultimately, there is always going to be some mystery to it. We may not understand it all, but we *can* experience it all. Can you say that you've experienced the Christian life? Is your life transformed? Do you see the power to live for Christ in your life? No matter how much you know, or how long you've been around the church, if you don't experience it, perhaps you need to be born again.

Then Jesus begins to scold Nic – just like he does for you, if you are not born again. Interestingly, Jesus no longer refers to himself as "I," he says things like, "We speak of what we know and what we have seen..." So who's "we"? Some say that he's referring to himself and John the Baptist. But most likely, since he just got done talking about the Holy Spirit, Jesus is referring to himself correctly – he's speaking here for the Trinity – God the Father, God the Spirit, and God the Son: "we." And then he speaks of the role of the God the Son in giving us this new life; he talks about how he must be:

## **3. Lifted up**

Jesus here refers to a story in the Old Testament, when the Israelites had been set free from slavery in Egypt and were still wandering around in the wilderness. They had become so ungrateful and disrespectful and sinned so deeply, that God sent a



plague of deadly, fiery snakes on them. And it got the desired result – the people repented, and so God relented. He had Moses put an image of a serpent on a stick so that if the people looked at it, they would realize that God *could* heal them, and they *would* be healed. It's in Numbers 21:4-9. Jesus is saying that story is like a parable for what *he* had come to do: to be lifted up on a cross, as a sacrifice death that he didn't deserve but for *our* sin, so that if we will look to him, we can be healed, forgiven, born again, and given the power to live an abundant new life. Because of Jesus' death on the cross, we have healing peace in our relationship with God. We have healing peace in our relationships with one another. We have healing peace in all of our circumstances in life, no matter what they are. And we have healing peace in ourselves. All of this that we've talked about comes because the LAST thing God wants to do is condemn us. The LAST thing God wants is to see us struggle and live subpar lives and spend our eternity in hell. Jesus is willing to be lifted up on a cross and to die for us because of:

#### 4. The *Love of God*

This ability to be reborn is nothing we can do for ourselves – it is entirely initiated by God:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* The very center of who God is, is love:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* God's love is so wide it is for every person and all of creation:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* Even though we deserve to be condemned, God sacrifices his very own Son to save us:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* God knew we could never wipe out our guilt, that we could never be good enough on our own to overcome our sin:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* God did everything necessary to give us this born again life:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* All that's left for us to do is believe it: to order our lives around this truth, to prioritize our lives around the relationship with God through Christ:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

God loves you as if you are the only one in all the world to love. He sent his Son to die on a cross for you, and would have done that for you if you were the only person

in all the world to die for. When are you going to accept it? When are you going to start experiencing it?

*Pray.*