

Born into God's Kingdom

A sermon on John 3:1–21 originally preached on May 21, 2023 at First Reformed Church in Oak Harbor, WA

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I grew up living in the city. Not always a huge city, but always a city. And when you're in the city, as you probably know, it's never *really* dark. Even in the middle of the night, with all your lights off and no moon, there are always little spots of light. It wasn't until I moved to Papua New Guinea and spent time out in remote villages that I learned what true darkness was. I'm sure those of you who live outside of town are very familiar with this kind of darkness. When it's truly dark, when there is no light anywhere, it doesn't matter if your eyes are open or closed. It all looks the same, and it all looks like nothing.

When it is this dark, the tiniest little flicker of light anywhere is immediately noticeable. When a light appears in a truly dark place it's natural, almost instinctive, for everyone to immediately look that way. Every head, every eye, turns towards the light without even thinking about it. It would take effort not to look.

John's audience, living in a time before the invention of electricity, would have been very familiar with truly dark darkness. In John chapter one, he uses the imagery of a light coming into a dark place to describe Jesus, God coming to live as a human being in our world.¹ The book of John really is a series of stories about what happened when various people saw that light. I think everybody who encountered Jesus noticed him. You can't help noticing a light in the darkness. But after noticing him, everybody had a choice. They could walk towards that light and embrace it for what it was, even if it hurt their eyes a little. Or, they could shut their eyes and turn the other way. Most of the stories in the book of John are about people wrestling with what to do with that light. Would they recognize who Jesus was, and if they did, would they accept him on his terms? Or, would they try to make him fit into a mold of who they thought he would be or who they thought he should be, or who they wanted him to be?

In John 2, we see that Mary recognized and accepted who Jesus was, even before his first public miracle. But later in that chapter the Pharisees refused to accept him, even after the miracle he performed. They didn't like that miraculous sign; they wanted another one, a different one, a better one, or perhaps one that would fit better with their ideas of who the Messiah should be.

But in John 3, we learn that one of those Pharisees, Nicodemus, came to find Jesus alone, at night, for a private chat. Remember, John opened the book with this imagery of light in the darkness, so it's significant now that he specifically tells us that Nicodemus comes at night. I think we're supposed to connect those dots and see this as Nicodemus's encounter with the light of Jesus in the

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middle of the darkness. What will Nicodemus do with that light? Will he receive it, or turn away? The fact that he came at night to talk to Jesus privately also means that his interest was probably sincere.

In cultures like this, where

honor and shame are really important realities, asking questions in public can easily shame the person being asked. If they don't know the answer, or their answer seems unacceptable, they'll be shamed in front of everyone. So, if you want to challenge or humiliate someone, you're definitely going to question them publicly. The Pharisees did a lot of that with Jesus. But Nicodemus came privately, suggesting that he was genuinely interested in hearing what Jesus had to say and that his questions were sincere.² He truly wanted to be Jesus's student, and he addresses him as a teacher. In verse 2 he says, "Rabbi," (which means teacher), "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" (NIV). Nicodemus sees the light, he accepts the miracles Jesus has performed, and he recognizes that this light has come from God. He's coming to Jesus as a student coming to a teacher; he's using the student/teacher relationship to describe the relationship he wants to have with Jesus. This is one of many ways we could describe our participation in the kingdom of God. We can think of ourselves as Jesus's students, which is what the word "disciple" actually means. We could also think of ourselves as citizens of God's kingdom, or pilgrims on a journey to God's kingdom, or soldiers fighting for God's kingdom, or laborers working to build God's kingdom. These are legitimate metaphors, used throughout the Bible to describe our participation in God's kingdom. They're not wrong.

But in this conversation, when Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as a teacher from God and approaches him as a student, Jesus does not speak in terms of a teacher/student relationship. He doesn't use any of the other metaphors we mentioned either. He goes straight to a very different metaphor and says: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3 NIV). In that moment, in the conversation, Jesus is avoiding all those other possible metaphors for relationship in God's kingdom and inviting Nicodemus into a relationship of rebirth. It's as if Nicodemus says: "I see you, Jesus. I see your light in the darkness. I recognize who you are. You're a teacher from God." And Jesus says: "No, Nicodemus, you don't truly see me as I want to be seen by you. In order to see the kingdom of God, to come into the light and see who I really am and who I really want to be to you, you need to be reborn."

Before birth we're in darkness; we can't see anything. It's only after birth that we are in the light, and we can see. We have to be *born* into God's kingdom to truly see who Jesus is; we have to let the

Holy Spirit give birth to us. John 3:6 says that “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (NIV). Or, in the New Living Translation: “Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.”

In “Christianese” we talk so often about being born again that the phrase doesn’t surprise us, but I think we need to take a minute to recognize how shocking it is. For us, after 2000 years of doing theology about spiritual rebirth, it’s easy for us to laugh at Nicodemus and say, “Silly Nicodemus, he thought Jesus was talking about physical birth.” But what else was he supposed to think? It was a weird thing to say. Throughout the book of John, Jesus gets in the habit of making these statements that sound ridiculous if you take them literally. Consider his claim in John 2 that he could rebuild a temple in three days. Here in John 3, it seems like an absurd thing to say that you have to be born again to see the kingdom of God.

Now, why would Jesus use the metaphor of birth? Why do we need to be *born* into God’s kingdom? Why is it not enough to enter it as a student, or as a citizen, pilgrim, soldier, or laborer? Well, think about this. Within those other metaphors, with those other identities, we would have a fair amount of independence. Those other identities all describe things that we can *do* within God’s kingdom, and we could potentially stop doing them at some point and decide to do something else instead. I could decide that I wanted to be somebody else’s student for a while, or emigrate and become a citizen of a different kingdom, or take a break from my pilgrimage, or stop fighting in the war, or work somewhere else. I could walk away from any of those other relationships and continue to live my life. It wouldn’t kill me. I would still be my same independent self.

It is not the same for a baby being born. If we are being born into the kingdom of God, it’s not something we do. It has to do with who we are, or rather, *whose* we are. We cannot walk away from that relationship and hope to live. To be born into God’s kingdom, to become God’s tiny, unborn, or newborn baby means acknowledging a relationship of complete and utter dependence on God, recognizing that we depend on God for our very existence.

You see, being a part of God’s kingdom isn’t like a day job, where we go off and do a bunch of useful things for God and then take some time off for ourselves. No, being part of God’s kingdom means entering into a state of being in a constant connection with God. The reality of God’s kingdom on earth was ushered in by the Son of God’s own birth into a relationship of trustful dependence on a human mother. So, it’s only fitting that we enter that kingdom in the same way, through birth into a relationship of complete and continual connection of trust in, and dependence on, God as our eternal mother.³

This same idea is communicated in the other Gospels. Luke 18 tells about people bringing their little children and babies to Jesus. The word Luke uses, in verse 15, specifically means a baby, an infant. And Jesus, likely holding one of those little babies, says in 18:16–17: “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (NIV). We have to become young, small and tiny, in order to be born, to see, or to receive the kingdom of God.

If we’re too big we won’t fit, because the way that leads to life is narrow. Kristin Wright-Bettner put it this way. She writes:

Jesus said that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we have to change. We need to do something differently than we’ve been doing. And that something different involves us becoming little again. I used to think, subconsciously, that Jesus was prescribing a law. If we don’t obey and become like little children, then God is going to actively prevent us from entering the Kingdom. But now I think perhaps Jesus was simply stating a fact—describing, not prescribing. Not becoming little, in itself, is the thing that keeps us from entering the Kingdom. We just won’t fit. The birth canal is a narrow passage, after all. Small is the gate, narrow is the path that leads to life.⁴ To fit through, you have to be little.⁵

If this blows your mind, you’re in good company. Nicodemus said, “How can this be?”⁶ And within this narrative, that’s the last we hear from him. That question is full of astonishment and bewilderment. How can this be? Did Nicodemus get it? Did he accept the light? Was he willing to receive the relationship Jesus offered him on Jesus’s terms? Was he willing to be birthed through that narrow place of dependence on God?

Well, we don’t really know, but the more important question is, do we get it? We each have to ask ourselves, am I willing to be born into the light of God’s kingdom, and accept the relationship of dependence on God that that requires? Jesus said in John 3:19–21:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (NIV)

Are we willing to be born into the light? Do we recognize Jesus as he is and accept a relationship with him on this level? Are we willing to become smaller, more dependent on God, and receive our identity as a newborn baby in God’s kingdom, even if we’ve been members of that kingdom for decades? And if we are, how do we do that? How can this be? What does that look like? As we think about how to apply this and what it means for each of us today, there are two things I think we need to take away with us.

First, I’m *not* going to say to you, “Get your act together and hurry up and be born already.” That’s not how birth works. We are not the ones giving birth in this metaphor, the Holy Spirit is, so the burden is not on us. We are the ones being born. This is why Jesus talks about *receiving* the kingdom of God rather than earning our way into it. Let it happen. Receive your identity as God’s baby, even if you’ve belonged to God your whole life. And if you feel inadequate, or unworthy of this identity, good. You are. We all are. That’s part of what it means to get smaller. To realize how very needy we are and receive God’s love in the middle of our messy neediness. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (that is, “those who are poor and realize their need for” God), “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”⁷

I suspect that our birth into God's kingdom is not a one-time event, but an on-going process that will take our whole life on this earth. Yes, we are already members of God's kingdom when we recognize the light and acknowledge who Jesus is: God who came to live with us as a human, who gave his life for our spiritual birth and returned from death for our spiritual life. But that acknowledgement is only the beginning of our birth, and the process will continue until the full realization of God's kingdom when Jesus comes back. So that's the first take away.

And second, as you learn to fully accept that identity of dependence, know that you are very, very loved. Moms and dads, you know how deeply loved that little baby is, even before they're born. That's how much God loves you. John 3:17 says that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (NIV). God's not waiting for you to mess up so you can be condemned. No, the Holy Spirit is actively working to safely birth you into God's kingdom. You are loved by God not because of anything you do, but simply because of who you are—God's child. We don't love our babies because of any particular qualities or capabilities they have. We don't love them because of what they can do for us or how good they are. We love them just because they're ours! Honestly, most newborn babies are at least a little bit funny-looking for a while, and they can't give anything back to us but love. Participation in God's kingdom is not something we earn or accomplish, and I think that's why Jesus used this metaphor instead of any others.

To be a good student, we would have to learn enough and know enough. To be a good citizen we would have to keep the laws well enough. To be a good pilgrim we would have to travel far enough. To be a good soldier we would have to fight hard enough or skillfully enough, and, to be a good laborer we would have to get enough work done. But to be a good baby we just have to be. When you are born into the kingdom of God, you are fully loved, just as you

are. Your identity and status within God's kingdom do not depend on any qualities or capabilities that you bring or develop. They rest entirely on your identity as God's deeply loved child. Sure, growing and developing is good and healthy. We want to do that. But it doesn't make God love us any more or less, or change our status in the kingdom of God. God doesn't love you because you're such a great person. God loves you because you're God's person, even when you're not a great person.

So receive the kingdom of God like an infant. Just say yes to Jesus again today, and come into the light. Let yourself be born into your identity as God's deeply loved child.

Notes

1. John 1:4–5.
2. E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (InterVarsity, 2012) 135, Kindle Location 1879.
3. Juliann Bullock, *Mothers as the Image of God* (Resource Publications, 2022) 83–84.
4. Matt 7:14.
5. Quoted in Bullock, *Mothers as the Image of God*, 88–89.
6. John 3:9 (NIV).
7. Matt 5:3 (NIV).



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