

March 1, 2026—The Second Sunday in Lent
The Rev. James Wyatt

From the Top

“You must be born from above.” Did those words surprise you? One way or another, you have probably heard the King James translation of that verse: “Ye must be born again.” The decision of the New Revised Standard Version to go with the more literal translation, “born from above,” is interesting, and I think it’s the right decision for a number of reasons.

So, literally, the Greek word John uses here means “from above.” Idiomatically, well, it’s similar to how we might say “from the top”—like in music or theater, taking it from the top means starting over again from the beginning. And I think that’s actually the key to understanding this whole passage.

This passage reads like a really awkward conversation—and it is, because Jesus and Nicodemus are basically talking past each other. Nicodemus is trying to understand the literal words of Jesus and Jesus is talking in a world of metaphor. Nicodemus wonders about entering a second time into the mother’s womb, and Jesus tells him about entering the kingdom of heaven. Nicodemus is talking about being born and Jesus is talking about the birth of everything—he’s talking about Genesis.

If you were here on the Sunday after Christmas, you heard me preach about how the first chapter of the Gospel of John is basically a sermon on the first chapter of the book of Genesis. That first chapter of John highlights the role of the Word in the creation of all things to help us understand the role of the Word—who is Jesus—in the ongoing work of creation. It stresses that creation continues when the Word becomes flesh, and it continues in us, when we are empowered to become children of God, born of the will of God. And this passage in chapter 3 continues the same ideas.

Nicodemus has come to him at night, in the darkness. And Jesus references the imagery of Genesis—speaking light into the darkness. As the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters of creation, Jesus talks about the wind blowing where it will, enlivening those who are born from the Spirit. Nicodemus is talking about being born from the womb, and Jesus is talking about creation, about becoming, about being born as children of God.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and says, “I know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” And in response to that Jesus says, “Unless you’re born from above, it’s not possible to see the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, “Yes, I came from God, so that you all can be remade from God. Yes, I am the only-begotten Son of God, but God will beget all of you and re-create you, from the top, as children of God.”

“How can these things be?” Nicodemus says. That’s a good question. And the answer Jesus gives is a little cryptic. He starts talking about believing, and how those who believe in the Son of Man may have eternal life. Whew, there’s a lot to unpack there.

First of all, what does it mean to believe in the Son of Man? Well, it does *not* mean asserting the truth of some doctrinal statement, like, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the only son of God” and “through him all things were made.” We *assert* those things when we say the Nicene Creed together, but reciting the creed is not the source of our life and transformation. No, Jesus suggests what believing in him means when he alludes to the story from the book of Numbers, of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. That story comes up in the lectionary on this Sunday in year B—so next year we’ll read a slightly different set of verses around the story of Nicodemus and we’ll read the relevant passage from Numbers, and I will probably talk more about it then. But the short version of the story is that the people of Israel were trekking through the wilderness after their escape from slavery in Egypt. And their camp was beset by venomous snakes. So God told Moses to put a bronze serpent up on a pole, so anyone who got bitten, all they had to do as they were racked with pain from the venom coursing through their veins was to look up at the bronze snake on the pole, and the poison would be neutralized.

That, Jesus says, is what believing in the Son of Man is like. It's trusting that when we're racked with pain from the venom coursing through our veins, if we can just turn our face and look to the Son of Man, we will live. Faith in Jesus is relying on him in a matter of life and death, trusting that he will be there for you, no matter what—"the One who watches over you will not fall asleep," in the words of our Psalm this morning. That's the kind of trust in God that Abraham displayed when he packed up his entire life and moved to the land where God led him, complete confidence that God would be there for him.

And the gift that God has given to the world God loves so very much is that those who trust so deeply in God "may not perish but may have eternal life." To be clear, the word "eternal" here does not mean unending or everlasting, whatever King James might say. Jesus is talking about quality, not quantity—not a life that will never end, but a life that is transformed, a life that comes from God and participates in God. He's talking about abiding in God and God abiding in us, sharing in the life of Eternity. He's talking about living the life of children of God, life transformed, life re-created from the top.

I know I say this all the time, but that is the whole point—the whole purpose of our coming together as a church: to be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ, more and more into children of God. That transformation happens individually, within each one of us, and more importantly, it happens as a community, transforming the way we live together. We are here to live out an alternative to the broken, war-torn world around us—to show the world what a community built on love looks like, to demonstrate in our lives what grace, forgiveness, and hospitality look like. As we are re-created individually, born from above and made into children of God, and our community is re-created and shaped into the kingdom of God, we are invited to be a part of the transformation of the world.

Oh, friends, I know that right now the world is a very dark and frightening place. I know it's hard to hold on to any hope that things will get better or brighter any time soon. And I know that the Spirit of God, like a restless wind, is still sweeping over the chaos and confusion, still creating, still speaking light into the darkness, still sparking hope and faith and joy. I know that God's love is so much bigger than us—big enough to encompass... even "the world" is too small a word. God so loves the cosmos, Jesus says, the whole created order—God loves it all so much that God re-creates and re-births and transforms it all, bringing the life of Eternity into the midst of all this darkness and death.

Let us with joy and unquenchable hope and unconquerable love play our part in God's re-creation as we carry that life from this place wherever we go.

Amen.