

You must be born of the Spirit

Good morning...

Well, as often happens at different points in the year, today we begin into a new preaching series – a new study – that will carry us through till the end of the summer. And the focus of this series – as it says in the bulletin – is on the person, **passion and ministry of the Holy Spirit...** And, with that, in that, what it means to *live **by the Spirit.***

Which **we need to talk about** – and explore together – for many reasons, but two, in particular stand out today:

One. Because, simply put, many of us live with a lot of confusion regarding the Holy Spirit – His nature, His work, and His presence and activity in our lives. Having been around the Christian community my whole life, I can say with **clarity** that many of us **lack clarity** when it comes to the Spirit. Many of us are pretty familiar with Jesus and God the Father, but when it gets down to the Spirit (God's Spirit – the Holy Spirit), we find ourselves somewhat **foggy** – with more questions than answers, more confusion than clarity.

Which brings us to, and **intensifies** the second reason we need this series – because Life with God – Life in Jesus – the Christian life – is fundamentally a life lived **by the Spirit.**

That's what the apostle Paul said to the Christians in **Galatia** (in the letter we call Galatians) – **Galatians 5:25** – "*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*"

"Since **we live by the Spirit**, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

Which means **we need to understand this, don't we?** If, as followers of Jesus, **we live by the Spirit** – we need to make sense of what this means, and **how** we are to **keep in step with the Spirit...**

So, with that in mind, **let's PRAY...**

If you have a bible, open it with me to the **gospel of John** – chapter 3, verse 1.

But before we read the passage – I want to tell you how and why this passage become significant for me a number of years back.

And part of the story has to do with **my old hairdresser**. We'll call her **Liz**.

Liz cut my hair for the better part of a decade – up until we moved to Saskatchewan.

I know a lot of guys who just go wherever they can get a cheap cut – but I'm not wired that way. I tend to find someone and stick with them.

And that was definitely true with **Liz**. I kept going back to her because she always gave me a great haircut, **and** because, for a season when funds were really tight for Janet and I, and I couldn't afford what she charged, she told me to come anyways and she gave a discount.

(She said it was offset by another client of hers – a young guy who came every 4th Thursday – like clockwork – even though she didn't think he needed to come in that often. And he always tipped big.)

So, she said he tip was paying for my cuts.

But, along with this – beyond her quality control and her giving me a deal for a time – I also kept going back to her – even when it became a bit of a drive – because of our friendship – a friendship that I was convinced God was in the midst of. [My dad also got his hair cut from her, as did one or two of my uncles.]

It was never a quick visit, cause we'd talk a lot. Mostly, she'd talk... But it was good. We'd catch up and then just talk about everything in our lives, work, relationships, stresses, pet peeves.

And over the years, amidst talking about everything, we had a lots of conversations about God, about church, about Jesus and God's will.

Her best-friend's **sister** was a Christian, who went to a lively church nearby, and had been inviting her to church and to her bible study for years. And for a while there, she went on Sunday nights to that church. Not because she believed, but because she loved the energy of it all, and was impressed with the pastor.

Well, a couple years into all this, after many conversations with my dad and myself (and I'm sure others), she decided to go to Alpha at my parent's church.

[If you don't know what Alpha is – it's a 10-week relational course that a lot of churches offer – that invites people to explore the person and claims of Jesus in a pretty non-threatening setting. It's great. We do Alpha here a couple times a year in different people's living rooms. I've been a part of it myself.]

Anyways, she decided to go to Alpha. And my dad and I were pretty excited. We'd both been praying for her for a long time – praying that she would come to know Jesus and life in Jesus.

So, **she went**. And ended up hitting it off with one of my cousins who was helping lead the discussions. She sat her Alpha table each week... And over the weeks she came to the conclusion that she wanted to become a Christian. And with this, she started attending my parent's church on Sundays.

She told me that she didn't really like the worship, so she'd try to come a little late, just before the pastor would preach.

And we talked about it each time that I came to get my haircut.

And the whole thing **got me excited** (excited by her new-found expression of faith and how God had used our friendship in it all).

But over the next season, in the months that followed, our conversations left me increasingly **discouraged** – as I increasingly came to see that her new-found "faith in Jesus" had no real impact on her life – her values, her choices, her relationships, priorities, ambitions and attitudes.

Her claim to being a Christian **didn't make any difference** to her life; it just meant that she now went to church (**sometimes** – if wasn't too nice of a weekend), and she believed in Jesus, that He died for her, and that she would go to heaven...

But that was about it. It was just a belief she had added to her life and other beliefs.

And over the next season, she started to go to church less, and then seemed to just put it all on the shelf, and go on with life, like nothing had ever happened...

She might still call herself a Christian (because of that brief interlude in her life, and the prayers she prayed in the midst of it – and cause she lives in Langley), but I suspect that it would have no

more significance to her life today than what brand of shampoo she used last year...

We live in a day when hordes of people in the Global West still claim to be Christians. The rise of those who self-identify as non-religious is hugely real in Canada – particularly in places like Victoria – but for all those who eschew faith today, the most recent Stats-Canada census still had **22.1 million** Canadians *self-identifying, calling themselves* Christians.

That's **over two-thirds** of the population of Canada.

Three quarters of the population of Saskatchewan *call themselves* Christians.

Roughly **82% of Quebec** (the online pornography capital of the world) identify as Christians.

And **almost 45%** of BC residents *call themselves* Christians...

And yet so many of these people, know nothing of the reality of a living faith in Jesus Christ, of living as His follower, of ***life in Christ***.

And I remember grappling with this as I walked alongside Liz and her journey – asking God... **"God, are YOU in this?"**

And through it all, I become increasingly gripped by the words of Jesus' to religious leader names Nicodemus in **John 3:1-16...**

Where Jesus says very pointedly:

*"No one can **see** the kingdom of God without being born again – or born from above... No one can **enter** the kingdom of God without being 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.**'"*

Which is to say – that, according to Jesus (whom many of us trust to speak with authority about Life with God) – according to Jesus, true **life with God** is not something that we come to experience simply through a process of intellectual enlightenment, or faithfully practicing spiritual disciplines, or moral reformation, or a "decision" made at something like Alpha, but Life with God is something that only comes about through **a radical, gracious invasion of God – by His Spirit – into our lives – so as to give birth to a new life – His life – God's life – in us..... by the Spirit.**

And in saying this – in speaking of our need to be "born again" – Jesus **was** not and **is** not referring solely to a new life **after** this life – but being born again – born of the Spirit – in the midst of this life.

This is what Jesus clearly, boldly states in **John 3** – something we need to hear.

So let's listen together to this **exchange** between Jesus and one of the religious leaders of his day – **John 3:1-16.**

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Later on in the account, Jesus refers to Nicodemus as "Israel's

teacher" (in v.10). Some scholars even point out that the text doesn't just refer to him as "one of Israel's teachers" – but as "*Israel's teacher*". Whatever the case, we need to understand that Nicodemus is no religious or spiritual amateur.

He was a Pharisee (which is to say, he was a member of a particularly devout, demanding, Jewish order), and, as John tells us, a member of the Jewish Ruling Council.

In other words, Nicodemus was a Jew among Jews. He had dedicated his life to the study and observance of the Law, and the Traditions that had been built up around the Law. And he wasn't just an authority on the Jewish faith; he was a leader. He was one that others came to for spiritual guidance. One who gave judgments on matters of righteousness.

And yet, unlike most of the Pharisees who adamantly *opposed* Jesus, Nicodemus was, for certain reasons, ***drawn*** to Jesus.

Intrigued by Jesus.

Having heard Him teach (or heard about his teaching), and having seen or heard about the miracles he had been performing in the city square (which history attests to), Nicodemus had the humility to admit that Jesus was somehow being significantly used by God... That God was **with** him. That **Jesus** *had* been sent by God, and was, consequently, a teacher that he needed to learn from.

And so **he sought Jesus out** for a private meeting – after dark... Some people give Nicodemus flack for this – as though it was a sign of fear (fear of what others might think). But it's possibly too that this was just the only way he could get some time with Jesus (everybody wanted some of Jesus' time).

Back to the text – **(v.2)** – *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."*

Notice that Nicodemus doesn't pose any sort of question – he just comes and humbly leaves the agenda open to Jesus. In a sense, he is saying – "**Jesus, teach me**".

And so Jesus says... **(v.3)**

*"Very truly I tell you, **no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.**"*

Imagine being this Pharisee – this member of the Ruling Jewish Council – and hearing those words... I'm assuming there was **a pause**.

Nicodemus was shocked by Jesus words, and responds... **(v.4)**
"How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Now we need to recognize that Nicodemus probably didn't actually think that Jesus was suggesting that men and women, who've

already been born, need to re-enter their mother's womb and be physically birthed or born again.

And I say this, we know this, not just because that is an absurd idea, but because the Jews in Nicodemus' day had a concept of 'new birth', of being 'born again'. And as a Pharisee, Nicodemus, of all people, would have known this.

It was just that Nicodemus believed this to only applied to **Gentiles** – non-Jews.

You see, when a Gentile converted to Judaism, underwent circumcision, and was baptized, they were said to be "**born again**" – "*to start life anew like 'newborn children'*".

So Nicodemus understood something of what Jesus was getting at – he just couldn't get his head around the fact that Jesus was saying that this was necessary for everyone... including **himself**.

"What do you mean Jesus? What do you mean **no one**! **No one** can see and enter the kingdom of God without being born again – born from above – born of water and the Spirit?"

I'm a Jew: Nicodemus **must** have thought. *My parents are Jews. I practically grew up in the synagogue.*

And not just that, **I'm a Pharisee**. I've spent my life studying and memorizing and living in devotion to the laws of God. **You know this, Jesus!** How can you tell me that **I** need to be born again? I was

born right the first time. It's only the Gentiles that must to be born again? *What do you mean **no one**?"*

We've all probably heard or parroted Nicodemus' response at some point... I can hear it from Liz – "I went to Alpha!"

"My parents are Christians", or "I grew up going to church", or "I've gone to church all my life", or "I was baptized.. I was christened... I was confirmed...", or "I prayed a prayer at camp when I was a kid", or "I worked at Camp Imadene...", "I went to Young Life", "I used to go Lambrick..." "I go to Lambrick..."

Nicodemus' response is one I've heard many times over the years.

But Jesus is speaking of something deeper here – isn't he?

As His words in **v.5** and following reveal.

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, **no one can enter the kingdom of God – no one can experience true Life with God in this life – without being 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."

Ok, so lets just stop and ask: What does Jesus mean by this?

What's he getting at? What does it mean to **be "born of water and the Spirit"**?

How would Nicodemus have understood this? Because He would have understood it in some way. Jesus wasn't out to confuse him.

Challenge him, yes, but confuse him, no.

You see, in referring to being born "*of water and the Spirit*", Jesus wasn't just pulling some obscure concept out of nowhere. He was referencing a passage in the prophetic writing of **Ezekiel** that Nicodemus would have **known so well**. **Ezekiel 36:24f.**

The passage was well-known in Nicodemus' day because it was a prophecy that promised a day when God would put an end to Israel's exile – a day of **renewal and restoration**. Something Nicodemus and every Jew in his day **longed for**.

In that day, **God says**,

*"I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back to your own land. **I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean**; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a **new spirit** in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. **And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.** Then... you will be my people, and I will be your God".*

With this passage in our minds, listen again to **Jesus** words:

No one can enter the kingdom of God without being 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."

Do you hear what **Jesus** is saying – to Nicodemus and to us?

He's saying that the day of the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy **is here**. The day of the Spirit's coming is here – to give birth to a new

life in all whom God calls...

But how? "How can this be?" – Nicodemus asks (v.9).

It seems impossible to Nicodemus – **as it probably does to us.**

How? How?

How can we be truly **born again** – born **of God**? *How* can we come to be born of the Spirit? *How?*

As a wise Christian **has said,**

"It is not the desirability of this change that Nicodemus questioned; that he knew too well [he longed for it]; **it is the possibility.** Nicodemus is up against the eternal problem, the problem of a person who **wants** to be changed and who cannot change themselves." (William Barclay, 125)

And I think this is the question that most of us wrestle with.

How? *How?*

We know that we're not able to transform ourselves. Many of us have tried. We can discipline ourselves – to do certain things and not do other things. We can modify our behavior. We can fight and suppress our selfish propensities.

But **we can't breath spiritual life into ourselves.** We can't give ourselves a new heart. We can't bring forth a new life within ourselves.

Which is exactly what Jesus is getting at.

What He says **is needed** is **NOT** something we can bring about – by our moral effort, or our spiritual discipline, or some process of

intellectual enlightenment. What we need is something greater –
something deeper. **Something that only God can do.**

Listen again to Ezekiel's prophecy and hear God's repeated "**I**".

Ezekiel 36:24f. God says,

*"**I** will take you out of the nations; **I** will gather you from all the countries and bring you back to your own land. **I** will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; **I** will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. **I** will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; **I** will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And **I** will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will be my people, and **I will be your God.**"*

And then in the following chapter Ezekiel describes a vision of the Valley of Dry Bones – symbolizing the nation of Israel who were all but dead – and God says He's going to make them live. [**Ezekiel 37:11**] The people say, *"But our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."*

In other words – "Sounds great, but *how*? It's just **not** possible"...

And in response God says, "**My people...** **I** am going to open your graves and bring you up from them... **I** will put my Spirit in you and you will live."

"I will put my Spirit in you and you will live".

"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit".

It's easy to read **John 3** and hear it as a rebuke of Nicodemus – **but it's not.** It's a revelation and an invitation – to Nicodemus **and**

to us.

That **life with God** is about more than going through the motions, and maintaining our spiritual disciplines or practices, and reading the Bible a lot, and trying to be better people.

No. Life with God is a **Life with God** - and it happens, not as the result of any of the things I've just listed, but it happens through **the gracious invasion of God Himself – by His Spirit – into our lives.** And not just our hearts, but **our whole being.** Washing away our impurities and idolatries, and giving birth to a new life in us... God's life – **alive in us.** Alive in and by the Spirit...

Ok, but still – **how?** How Jesus? That's the question.

And ultimately – **the answer** that Jesus gives to the need that He names – is – **Himself.**

Not – "Go do this" or "God do that" – but **Come to Me.**

What an incredible mystery and what an incredible grace – Jesus stands before every one of us and says "You **must** be born again. If you are to live – to truly live Life with God – you **must** be born from above."

And in the next breath, we hear Him say to each one of us –

"And this is why I have come... This is what I am here to do..."

Which is where the whole conversation with Nicodemus leads –

to the part of **John 3** that many of us know so well.

John 3:16 – *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."*

We often quote and hear this verse as a stand-alone verse; but, in truth, it comes to us in the context of **this** conversation – **as the answer to this question – HOW?** How can we be born again? Born from above? Born of the Spirit – and drawn into the life of God – the life of the Kingdom – in this life and beyond?

And the answer Jesus gives is **Himself**...

Come to me. Turn to me – in repentance and faith.

Not just add faith in Jesus to our list of beliefs, and otherwise going on with life as we know it, but turn to Him – throw all aside to embrace Him – to trust Him – seek and find life in Him...

And in doing so, we will find our lives **invaded** by His life – **by His Spirit.**

This is what the gospel is all about – this is **what Jesus offers** – and what we want to spend the coming season exploring together: what the Spirit and life in the Spirit – the Spirit that Jesus comes to give us – is all about. That we would learn to live **by the Spirit.**

This is where we're going this summer because this is what we need – and long for – and not only that, but this is what God wants for

us and is seeking...

That's the encouragement in all this. Our longing to know God more today doesn't start and end with us – it is there because **God desires us... God is seeking us...** and **His** desire is leading us forward – to Himself...

----- benediction

~ inviting your stories, experiences and questions...

~ inviting you "***And God showed up***" stories...