

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: What's Your Story?

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Scripture:

John 3:1-17

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

³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

⁴ "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!"

⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ 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."

⁹ "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ 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. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Transcript:

Great to see all of you here in the room. Those of you who are joining online, thank you for joining us. So glad to have you here. The scripture reading today is from John chapter three. 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. So there's a phrase I use in my sermons probably more than almost any other phrase. I wonder just in your mind, if you could take a guess, what is that phrase that I use almost more than any other phrase.

"I have a friend who." Annie got it. "I have a friend who." I did a search of all my sermons over the past 20 years for how many times I've used that phrase. I quit counting at 500. So it's more than that. And the poor band, right? They have to hear me use it twice a Sunday. So whatever the number is, it's double for them. I use that phrase a lot. For the rest of your life, when you hear that phrase, you will think of me, I will be in your head till the day you die. That should scare you to death. And that phrase always introduces a story. And I like to tell stories because stories are important. Stories matter. So we're starting a new sermon series today called Storytellers, looking at people in the Bible of the story that Jesus gives them of how Jesus changes their life.

What are your stories of how Jesus has changed your life? Because when we remember those stories for ourselves, it encourages us because we remember how Jesus has been there in the past. It gives us hope and courage for the future. And when we tell those stories to other people, it does a number of things. It helps people know that they're not alone in their struggles. It helps people have hope that Jesus can change their life the way he has changed our lives. And it makes Jesus look really, really good. When we tell our stories of how Jesus has changed our lives, we are bragging about Jesus. And that's a holy thing to do. What are your stories of how Jesus has changed your life?

And right now, probably, some of you are probably thinking, oh, I don't know if I have any stories about that, or I don't think my stories are very good stories. And the reason you think that it's the fault for that is on us. On us pastors. The reason you might think your story's not good enough is because of us pastors, because we love to tell the big dramatic stories of the drug dealer and the murderer. And then Jesus entered their life and they cried and they cried and they cried. And now they're missionaries. And once they dove into an icy river to save a puppy and they're nice to kids and cats and parakeets, praise the Lord.

And those are good stories. I know people who have stories like that. But if your story isn't that dramatic, you might start to think, well, my story suck. But Jesus becomes real to us in lots of different ways. And that's what we see in the text that I just read about a man named Nicodemus who comes to Jesus at night. So Nick at night, and that joke killed over there, but maybe not here, not in modern, okay, won't do it here in modern. No, I might. Nicodemus doesn't have a big dramatic story, drug dealer turned missionary. He doesn't have that story. But Jesus gently moves him from religion, which is about rituals and rules and routines to relationship with Jesus, which gives us new birth. Jesus is about to give Nicodemus a story of new birth. What are your stories of new birth?

Because see, Jesus doesn't want to just make you better. He wants to make you new. Jesus doesn't want to make you better. He wants to make you new and give you a story of new birth. So the text says, now, there was a Pharisee, man named Nicodemus who is a member of the Jewish Ruling Council. That sentence tells us a lot. He's a Pharisee, which was a strict group of religious leaders that worked really hard to obey all the rules, all the rituals, all the routines of religion. And they had lots of rules, lots of rituals, lots of religion. So he's a church kid, grew up going to church, he's had religion his whole life. On top of that, he's part of the ruling council that makes all the major decisions for Israel. So he's rich, he's well educated, he's powerful. He is the cultural elite, which may explain the next sentence where it says that he came to Jesus at night probably so no one can see him.

Because see, Nicodemus has a lot to lose if he's seen with Jesus because his fellow Pharisees see Jesus as a threat they need to eliminate. So if Nicodemus is seen with Jesus, he could lose his reputation, he could lose his friends, he could lose his job. See, religion is so much safer than new birth. Nicodemus has to take a risk here. And then he says to Jesus, 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. So Nicodemus sees something in Jesus that's different and he's drawn to him. And now notice Jesus response. Jesus replied, very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. And what's odd about that response is it seems a little bit like a non-sequitur.

Nicodemus says, you are a teacher from God. Jesus says, you must be born again. It seems like Jesus is abruptly changing the subject, and it doesn't seem to follow from what Nicodemus says. It's as if Nicodemus said, you are a teacher from God. And Jesus said the stick is blue, right? It just doesn't make sense. It's sort of the conversational equivalent of a squirrel. But as we're going to see in a minute, Jesus is not changing the subject. He's changing Nicodemus's life by moving him from religion to relationship with Jesus so he can have a story of new birth. Very truly, I tell you that you is Nicodemus, and that's important, part of the cultural elite. See, even atheists will say that faith in Jesus is good for people who need it, criminals, drug addicts, people facing a life crisis. And that's true. Jesus transforms those things.

But Jesus also says to people like Nicodemus, whose lives are going great, this new birth is for you. You who are the most popular person in school, you who write the op-ed pieces for the New York Times. You with the good job, good marriage, good life. This new birth is for you too. Truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God. That phrase always needs to be talked about. Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than he talked about any other subject over a hundred times. And the kingdom of God does not just mean going to heaven after we die. That's like 1% of what that phrase means. The other 99% is living the heavenly life here and now, it's when we have the courage and hope and joy that only Jesus can give us. It's when the poor are busted out of poverty.

It's when marriages and families are transformed. Injustice is overcome and that is so much bigger and so much more bold than just religion. In religion, God's job is to make me comfortable, make me happy, kind of assist me to get what I want. He's here to augment my life plan. That's religion. But Jesus is talking about something so much more radical than religion when he says you must be born again. He's talking about new birth. And new birth means three things. First, new birth means a new start. That's literally what it means. You go back to the starting point. You kind of start from zero. All our good deeds, all of our accomplishments, everything we've racked up, it doesn't count for anything when it comes to being citizens of the kingdom of God. CEO, you need Jesus just as much as the down and out. Pastor, you need Jesus just as much as the drug dealer.

Last week I was at a restaurant with a friend and when the waiter brought the bill, we both gave the waiter our credit card saying, I'll pay. And then my friend said, I'll pay. And we said, no, use my card, no use [inaudible 00:08:31] my card. Both of us were saying that. And finally my friend said to the waiter, he's my pastor, you have to let me pay or else you'll end up in hell.

And the waiter looked at me and said, he wins. Okay, it's not like that. It's not like pastors have special pastor points. When it comes to being citizens of God's kingdom, we all start over. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. And this is such good news for anyone who thinks, oh, you don't know what I've done. If you knew what, oh my God, I am so far from the kingdom of God. Jesus says, no you aren't. No you aren't. You're not behind. You're not behind the people who seem to have life dialed in, firing on all cylinders. You're not behind. Such good news. It's also bad news. You know why? Because it also means you're not ahead. Those of you who are nailing your life plan, you are at the top of your game. You're not ahead. When it comes to being citizens of the kingdom of God, we all start on level ground.

Second, new birth means a new you. Not just a slightly improved you, a new you. And religion won't give you that, but relationship with Jesus will. And this is supernatural. Few verses later, Jesus says, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water, which is physical, and the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. In other words, human effort yields human results. But a relationship with Jesus will give you a whole new spirit, the Holy Spirit. And that takes us back to this moment where Jesus seems to change the subject, but he's not actually, he's on point. Nicodemus says, we know that you are a

teacher sent from God. Teacher, teacher, but by saying to Nicodemus, "Uh-huh, you have to be born again." Jesus is saying, oh, I am so much more than a teacher.

And if you think of me as just a teacher, you will never enter the kingdom of God. Because see, new birth means a new start, a new you. And for that to happen, it means we need a savior. Jesus is saying, I am more than a teacher. I am your savior. If you think of me as teacher, you'll never see the kingdom of God. Few verses later in verse 16, famous verse, it says, for God so loved the world. The world. Nicodemus would've thought God loved Israel. God loved good people, but the world, even bad people? 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 to not send his son into the world to condemn the world, Jesus does not condemn you. But to save, not teach, not be an example, to teach, to save the world through him.

The moment we realize we need a savior, not a teacher to instruct me, not a personal assistant to help me get my life plan done, not a little spiritual pick me up before the week begins. But when we realize we need a savior, that is when new birth begins. New birth is not, I've got a life plan and Jesus will help me fulfill it. No new birth is a whole new life plan. New birth is not, I have a low self-esteem and Jesus will make me feel better about myself. [inaudible 00:11:40], new birth is a whole new self. New birth isn't just getting a slightly better version of you, a little bit of tweaking of your behavior. New birth is complete transformation. He doesn't want to fix the roof on your cottage. He wants to turn you into a palace. Jesus doesn't make us better. He makes us new.

I can get better on my own. Religion maybe might make me better, although religious people can be awfully mean sometimes and awfully fussy. But maybe religion could make me better. But new birth [inaudible 00:12:08]. For that I need a savior. When I first started following Jesus, some of my behaviors didn't change right away. But what did change was that my desires began to shift supernaturally to more and more want to do the things Jesus told me to do. Not out of guilt or obligation or shame not to earn God's approval, not to impress anyone, but as I experienced his love, I began to realize, oh, he loves me. That must mean he wants the best for me. And that must mean when he tells me to do certain things and not do other things, it's because that's what's best for me. And he made me so he knows better than I do what is going to be best for me.

And once that happened, and then my behavior started to shift. Some of them very quickly. Others still in process. But even for the ones that are taking a long time to shift, even those, I can look back and be encouraged because I see progress as I look back in my past. Jesus has changed my life. He is continuing to change my life. A teacher can't do that. Vending machine God that's just there to give me what I want can't do that. Only a savior can give us new birth. And by the way, this isn't a one and done thing. Yeah, I was newborn on August 15th, 2011. No, we need to be born again over and over and over. We need new birth almost every day.

So then the question is, if recognizing my need for a savior is prerequisite for having new birth, then how do we recognize our need for a savior? Well, simple. First is, recognize your sin and your forgiveness. And sins not popular. Pastors don't usually talk about it these days, but there's no other way to know that we need a savior than to recognize our sin. We talk behind someone's back, that destroys their reputation, which hurts their relationships. We've really hurt that person. We lash out in anger and say things to people that wound them sometimes for life. We ignore the needs of the lonely person or the poor person or the outcast or the marginalized. We participate in systems that are not just or fair and we don't even recognize that. We don't even know it. We lie to make us ourselves look better, which manipulates the people we're lying to because we care more about our image than we care about those other people.

And we care more about our image than having an honest relationship with those people. I have done all of those things and so much more. And there's two ways to handle that. One way is to say, you know what? Sin is something church people invented to gaslight all of us and make us feel guilt and shame. So I'm not buying it, no such thing as sin. That's just church folks trying to make me feel guilty. Okay, that dog don't hunt. And here's why. Because a lot of people who don't go to church at all get very anxious if you even hint, then maybe possibly they're not a good person. And we spend an awful lot of time trying to tell everyone that we are good people. Look at me. I believe all the right things. I vote all the right ways. I volunteer in all of these different ways.

Please tell me that I'm a good person. And we are so anxious about that because deep down we know we sin, we have sin and we're trying to compensate. So the other way is just to admit that there is something in me that does these things almost without thinking. That thing in me is sin, and I can't fix that on my own. I need a savior and he died on the cross to pay the price for my sins that I know needs to be paid or else there's no justice for those people that I've hurt. That's how much he loves me. And then our behavior begins to shift, not out of guilt, not out of obligation, not out of shame, but by experiencing his love. So ask Jesus to show you your sin. He loves to answer that prayer. Ask Jesus to show you your sin.

And as I said before, if you're having trouble with this, ask your spouse, ask your siblings. I'm sure they probably have some ideas that could get you started on that list. Recognize your sin, but also recognize your forgiveness because for some of you, all you do is focus on your sin. All you do is look at your sin and feel guilt and shame over it. So you don't need to recognize your sin. You people [inaudible 00:16:31] people who do that, you need to recognize that you are forgiven and infinitely loved and he does not condemn you. He delights in you and wants you to live a life free of shame and guilt. Second way to experience new birth is don't try to achieve it, just receive it. There are not enough good deeds I can do to make up for the harm I've caused to other people.

There just aren't. Jesus does that for me on the cross. And the new birth analogy is perfect, right? A baby doesn't birth itself, someone else does the pushing. Someone else does the bleeding,

someone else does the suffering. And in Jesus' day, women often died in childbirth. Someone needed to be willing to die in order for you to be born. And in that sense, Jesus is our mother. He suffered on a cross to pay the price for our sins and then was raised from the dead so that we can be born again. We can't achieve that, but we can receive that. It's something he does for us.

I have a friend who I'll call Lynn, and she recently told me some of her story because that's what this sermon series is about, telling our stories. And Lynn was raised going to church but never really had a relationship with Jesus. She had religion but not relationship. She said, I remember learning important things in church that I try to put into practice and I would almost always fail. She got married to a man that had a similar background and they did not go to church. And she said, furthermore, nobody ever even invited us. May that not be said of us. And she said, I felt like something was missing in life. Even though our marriage was good, our finances were good, something felt like it was missing. I tried volunteer work, I tried hobbies. I thought maybe having kids would fix it. But then when we had kids, it didn't fix it.

But when they had kids, they did think, you know what? We went to church when we were growing up. Maybe we should take our kids. So they started to go to church sometimes, occasionally, once in a while when it was convenient. And then later on they moved to a new house. And the neighbor on one side of their new house was a woman who was involved in something called Bible study Fellowship, BSF, which studies the Bible. She was a leader in that group. And then the neighbor on the other side of their house was an administrator for BSF. So Lynn was surrounded. This is how you know that God is pursuing you. He plagues you with Christians. And they invited [inaudible 00:18:59] join her at BSF. And she did. And one of the things she learned about was what crucifixion was really like. How violent, how bloody, how painful, how gruesome a death it was.

And as she learned about that, Jesus became real to her for the first time. She said, how could anyone love me so much to die for me in that way in particular? And she began to have a relationship with Jesus from that point on. And she said after that things begin to change. She said that emptiness inside. I didn't ask him to fill that emptiness, he just did it. I didn't even know to ask him to fill it. He just did it. It was a free gift, that emptiness that I was not able to fix on my own, couldn't do it on her own. She needed a savior. That emptiness was gone. The insecurity began to leave me. I was in free fall. But Jesus caught me and secured me to himself. And I'm so grateful because life has been better ever since.

She had experienced religion as a kid, as an adult. But when she experienced Jesus' love, when she experienced Jesus as savior, not teacher, she went from religion to relationship which gave her new birth. And I tell you that story in this sermon because this is not some big huge sermon of a drug dealer who then becomes a Christian and saves the puppy and all of that, right? This is a normal story. She wasn't down and out. Marriage was good, finances were good, life was good. But relationship with Jesus, not religion, gave her more and filled an emptiness, gave her

new life, new freedom, new hope, new birth. Some of it quickly. Some of it's still in progress. And that's what happens with Nicodemus. After Jesus tells him he needs to be born again. We don't hear Nicodemus' response. The story just ends there. We don't get to know what Nicodemus said.

But four chapters later in chapter seven, the ruling council wants to arrest Jesus and Nicodemus defends him. In chapter three, he came in secret at night. In chapter seven, he's defending Jesus publicly. And then in chapter 19 of John, after Jesus has crucified Nicodemus and another man named Joseph, take Jesus body off the cross, anoint him with oil and bury him. They would've removed every single splinter from the cross that was in his back. They would've removed every thorn that was in his head from the crown of thorns. There would've been blood everywhere. It was messy work, it was dirty work. And in that culture, it was women's work and no man would do it, let alone a well-respected religious leader. But there's Nicodemus, white collar worker who's never had dirt under his nails a day in his life doing all of that for Jesus.

Something has changed. He is new. Not worried what people are going to think about him, not worried about losing his job or his reputation. And it doesn't happen all at once. But from chapter three to chapter seven to chapter 19, Nicodemus has a new start. Nicodemus becomes a new person. Nicodemus finds his savior. He is born again free. So what are your stories of new birth? What are your stories of new birth? And maybe you feel like you don't have one. Well ask Jesus then to give you one the way he did for Nicodemus. And if you do have stories of new birth, tell them to remind yourself that Jesus is faithful, which gives you courage and hope in the present. But also tell them to other people so that they can know, that they can have hope. That Jesus changes a lot of things.

Jesus changes life. Tell them to me so I can anonymously tell them to the whole church and encourage thousands of people, I'm serious. Send me your emails. At some point, Nicodemus told this story to someone. Otherwise, how would we know about this private conversation between him and Jesus? And his story contains the most famous Bible verse ever. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish. I mean, if Nicodemus hadn't told his story, we wouldn't have that verse. And then what would people put on signs at football games? [inaudible 00:23:03] be a tragedy. What's your story? Is Jesus your leader, your teacher, your personal assistant to help you with your life plan? Or is he your Savior and your Lord who gives you new life, new freedom, new you, new birth, you can't earn it, but you can receive it. Simply say, Jesus, come into my life and be my Savior and my Lord, lead me, guide me. I give my life to you.

And if you pray that for the first time today, tell somebody, tell somebody here so we can help you take a next step. Or you can pray that prayer for the 200th time in your life because we need new birth over and over and over again. And when that happens, we are born again free. So Jesus, thank you so much that you do not settle for religion. You do not settle for a slightly improved version of us. You want relationship, you want restoration. You want new birth, new

life, new hope, new freedom, and only you can give it. So Jesus, whether we have known you our whole life or just getting to know you, show us today the new birth you want to do in our lives and we'll give you all the glory. I pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What do you think Jesus means by "born again"?
- What point is Jesus making by comparing new birth to the wind (vv 5-8)?
- In what ways have you been or are you being reborn?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.