

Born Anōthen

John 3:1-15

Sermon by Dan Schrock

June 29, 2008

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

One time I bought a pair of shoes from the Land's End mail order catalogue. On the particular day that the men's catalogue came from Land's End, I casually leafed through it. My eye landed on the photo of a good-looking pair of brown dress shoes. It so happened that I needed a new pair of brown dress shoes. I read the description and saw they were experimenting with a new sales method: you buy the shoes you want, Land's End would ship them to you via United Parcel Service, and then you'd try them on. If they didn't fit, or you didn't like them, you simply shipped them back to Land's End at company expense, and they'd refund your purchase price. So I ordered a pair on the phone.

I was nervous about this, however, because before I buy something, I usually want to see it and touch it. I'm especially that way when it comes to buying shoes. I want to stand in the shoe department, hold those shoes in my hands, and look carefully at them. How well do they appear to have been made? Are the materials going to last? Then, of course, I want to put them on and see how my feet feel inside of them. I want to lace them up and walk around in them. I want to see what they look like on my feet and what I look like

wearing them on my feet. Only after I do all these things am I ready to decide whether or not I want to buy the shoes.

A week after I ordered the shoes they arrived, and I tried them on immediately. It turned out that I didn't need to be nervous, because they fit right and looked right. I happily wore them for many years.

The kingdom of God works a little like Land's End—you have to join the kingdom before you can actually see the kingdom. "If you want to know the truth," Jesus tells Nicodemus, "then no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Let's put that colloquially: you can't walk into a store that sells kingdoms and try out the kingdom of God before buy into it. You can't hold it in your hands, put it on your feet, and look at yourself in the mirror while you're wearing it. No, it works like Land's End mail order. First you have to agree to buy into it. In Christian lingo, we call that "baptism." First you say yes and undergo a new birth. First you believe without giving it a test drive; first you join up without knowing what precisely what it is you're joining. *Then* you get to glimpse the kingdom of God. It's like paying \$150,000 first, and then afterward getting to see the new house you just bought.

What amplifies this dynamic is that God has no real competition. If I didn't like the arrangement Land's End was offering me, I could have gone to one of their competitors to buy shoes. For example, I could have gone to J.C. Penny. To get my business, J.C. Penny would have been only too happy to let me see, touch, and smell the shoes in their store before I bought a pair.

The kingdom of God doesn't work that way. If you want to participate in this kingdom, then you have to go to God, who is the only seller and who therefore has no competitors. If I want to go to St. Louis, I have numerous options. I can fly, take a bus, ride a train, or drive; and if I drive, I might have as many as 3 or 4 ways of getting there. If one way is blocked, I can always choose another route. But in the theology of the gospel of John, there's only one way to get to the kingdom of God.

The gospel of John has a peculiar view of the kingdom. From your study of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, you probably know that in those gospels the kingdom of God is a rich

and compelling image. In those 3 gospels, the kingdom is partly on earth and partly in heaven; partly in the present and partly in the future; partly social, partly political, partly psychological, and partly spiritual.

But not in John. In John, the kingdom of God is not at all on the earth. Other than in this little conversation with Nicodemus, the gospel of John mentions the kingdom in only one other place, and that's in Jesus' conversation with Pilate near the end of the book, in 18:36. When Pilate wants to know if Jesus is a king, Jesus bluntly says, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. . . . But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." This reply tells us at least two things. First, it tells us that Jesus' kingdom is fundamentally about peace, not war. Second, it tells us that the kingdom is not rooted anywhere on the earth. You won't find the kingdom of God in the United States of America, in Canada, in Mexico, or in any other nation on this globe.

Where is the kingdom of God? For the gospel of John, it's above, in heaven, somewhere way up there in the sky, far away. No bird can fly from here to there; no jet from here can land there; no space rocket can take off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, and one day carry you to this kingdom of God.

But there actually is a way to get from here to there. Even though you and I are stuck here on earth, we can actually see God's kingdom from here. All we need to do is to be born *anōthen*. Since there's no English word that matches it, I'll just use the Greek word which our story uses in verses 3 and 7. *Anōthen* is hard to translate into English because it has two different but equally important meanings. One meaning is "from above," which is the meaning that the NRSV uses. The other meaning is "again," which is the one that the NIV uses. Neither meaning is better than the other one; but by themselves, each meaning is inadequate and misleading—which is why reputable English translations always make sure to put the alternate meaning in the footnote. If you look in your own Bible, you should see one meaning in the text and the other one in the footnote; and if you don't, you might want to find yourself a different version. Putting one meaning of *anōthen* in the text and the other in the footnote is fine, as long as you realize the

translators could just as easily have switched which meaning they put in the text and which in the footnote.

By using the word *anōthen*, Jesus is making a pun that Nicodemus doesn't catch—and that's why Nicodemus gets confused and comes across as a bit slow. He gets one meaning of the word, but not the other one. He thinks Jesus is simply saying that if he, Nicodemus, wants to see the kingdom of God, he has to be born “again,” and this sounds impossible to Nicodemus. What do you mean?, he says. How am I supposed to crawl back into my mom's womb and pass through the birth canal? I'm a fully grown man with a beard! And she's an old woman by now! Jesus, you're a madman! You're a preposterous fool!

Nicodemus completely missed the other half of the pun about being born “from above.” If he had caught the pun, he would have known immediately that Jesus wasn't talking about asking his mom to birth him a second time. He would have realized that Jesus was talking about something heavenly, something far more wonderful than the already wonderful process of human birth. If Nicodemus had grasped the pun, he might have paused right there in the conversation and tried to wrap his mind around that double meaning. What does it mean to be born again, and at the same time to be born from above? How do those two things happen? And when they happen, in what ways do they allow you to see the kingdom of God? Even after two thousand years, we Christians are still trying to answer these questions. I'm still trying to answer them for myself. How exactly does the new birth happen? How does it grow in us? How does it allow us to see the kingdom of God?

I don't have answers. But in the vein of the gospel of John where testimony is a huge part of what happens, I can offer you a bit of testimony. Perhaps my testimony will stir up your own testimony. Perhaps it will evoke your own witness. For today, I have three parts to this testimony.

First, it's a mystery to me how we are born from above and again. Sure, I know the routine: you turn to God, repent, mess up, learn from your mistakes, repent and say yes all over again, and keep forging ahead. Yet it's still a bit of a mystery how this new birth

happens. I do know that new births come to us as gift. We can't make them happen on our own; nor can we force God to give us newness. However, we can open ourselves to the gift. We can become midwives to the gift. We can help it along.

Second, I myself have been born again and from above maybe ten thousand times. I figure it's been happening about once a day or so since I was baptized thirty-seven years ago. $37 \text{ years} \times 365 \text{ days in a year} = 13,505 \text{ days}$; so yeah, I've been born *anōthen* about 10,000 times.

Third, I've discovered it's true that if you consent to being born both again and from above, then you will see glimpses of the kingdom of God. I have seen that this kingdom is indeed fundamentally about peace, that it's not a kingdom built or maintained with violence. Although the kingdom is from above, I have nevertheless seen vestiges of it here on earth—I've seen footprints of God in creation, in my family, in the church, and in the worlds of politics, the sciences, and the humanities. I have seen that the God who presides at the center of this kingdom has hugely high standards, yet at the same time is also gentle with us. I have seen that the Spirit, what the gospel of John sometimes calls the Paraclete, is indeed extremely close to us—almost so close that sometimes I think I can reach out and maybe touch it. And I have learned that every time we are born again and born from above, our sight becomes a little more transformed, which in turn allows us to glimpse a little more of God's rule. The more we are transformed, the more we see of God's rule.

These are some of the things to which I can testify. However, in the gospel of John there is no such thing as only one witness. Rather there is a procession of witnesses, a group of witnesses who make up the church. So I wonder: To what can you testify? Where are you being born again, and being born from above? What have you seen? And maybe most important of all, to whom are you going to witness?