

“Have You Had a Born Again Experience?”—John 3:3-6

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Have You Had a Born Again Experience?”, is John 3:3-6 → *Jesus answered Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

How much impact do your past experiences have on your life today? Experiences are something that do affect us far into the future whether or not we realize it. Let’s look at a few examples:

- ① A man who feels he was mistreated by a pastor when He was not favorably received by him. Feeling like he got “burned” by the pastor he now refuses to go to worship, thus refusing the forgiveness of sin dispensed by the church—all because of a negative “pastoral” experience. This past experience is affecting his life and behavior today.

- ② A man in his forties is trying to figure out why he's still struggling with the experience of being sexually molested by somebody when he was six years old. This experience has had a profound affect upon his adult life.
- ③ A family has had their whole life pulled out from under them because of a divorce. The children are trying to figure out what's wrong with them that they caused their mom and dad to split up. Each spouse is going through their own feelings of inadequacy, anger and rejection while striving to find some order in the chaos of it all. Ultimately, the rest of their lives are redefined by this experience.

We have many past experiences that affect our living today. What I've listed for you are all negative examples. Maybe your response is: "But pastor, there are good experiences in life, believe it or not! I know that you get a lot of the bad stuff most of the time, but there are good things that do happen to people that also affect the rest of their lives!"

That's true. However, one of the reasons why people have such a difficult time "getting on with their life" in the present and living it the way God wants is related to these bad experiences from the past! It's too easy to allow your negative past to determine your perspective of life in the present. How much of your conversations are filled with talk about all the wonderful experiences of your past which **is determining how great life is now!** Or do

you flood your conversations with talk about the bad experiences most of the time? If only our positive experiences would far outweigh our negative experiences to affect how we perceive life and the choices we make in the present!

Could it possibly be that God wants us to have a whole new perspective on those experiences? Could it possibly be that the Holy Spirit wants us to experience life **from His perspective? Absolutely!** It is bound up in the experience of which Jesus speaks in our text—being *born again*.

Have you ever been asked, “Are you born again?” The next question is usually: “When were you born again?” While many people might react defensively to such inquiry, others will give a specific date for their “born again experience” and proceed to describe the activities which they experienced in connection to being “born again.” If you’re Lutheran you would probably refer to your baptism.

Our text records a Nic-at-night experience. A Pharisee named *Nicodemus*—an expert in the Old Testament Law of God—came to Jesus at night apparently to engage Him in theological discussion. He approached Jesus as a special teacher *come from God* based on his experiences with Jesus’ teachings and works. (cf. John 3:2)

Apparently the “experience” with Jesus recorded in our text must have

had a powerful faith impact on Nicodemus because, upon Jesus' death, he and Joseph of Aramathea buried the body of Jesus. In this action of giving Jesus a proper burial they both "went public" with their faith!! No more "sneaking around spiritually" for Nicodemus! His experience with Jesus changed the rest of His life!

When Jesus told Nicodemus in verse 3 of our text that *unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*, Nicodemus was thrown into an impossibility conundrum: *How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?* (cf. Verse 4) Jesus' statement simply made no sense to him. Throughout this discussion Nicodemus wasn't sure what Jesus was talking about. Why? Because he needed to be born again by placing his faith in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit! Jesus clarified His statement in verse 5 of our text: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.* Jesus was talking about a special birth indeed!

This birth is not based upon your knowledge of God's written Word. As a Pharisee Nicodemus was an expert in God's written Law of the Old Testament. That meant that he knew his stuff—and still didn't get it! This birth is not based upon your "pedigree" and up-bringing as reflected in statements like: "He should know better! After all, he comes from such a good Christian

family!” This birth is not based upon your “religious system” or the traditions and rituals you do. In fact, it is based on nothing you do but rather what is done to you! The Greek literally reads: “born from above.” Jesus was talking about a spiritual rebirth **which only God can effect from above!**

This is further explained by Jesus in verse 6 of our text: *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* Actually Jesus is not referring so much to an experience that a person has but rather to the whole person’s being and existence—his identity. **He’s talking about a relationship with the LORD which only He can make happen!!**

In Job 14:4 Job asked a rhetorical question: *Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?* The answer? No one! *That which is of the flesh is flesh* alludes to the fact that sinful parents can only give birth to sinners. Jesus is calling us to recognize our lost condition as sinners from birth as well as our need to be made alive in a special way so that we can live for God! It’s **God’s** special rebirth to which John referred in John 1:12-13 → *To all who received Jesus, who believed in His name, **He gave the right** to become children of God, **who were born**, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but **of God.***

Being *born again* is actually a way to describe a whole new way of life in the Holy Spirit. We need the Spirit to understand God’s grace displayed

toward undeserving sinners such as we. We need the Spirit to see Jesus in His Word, trust in Him alone for forgiveness and obey Him in our daily lives! As 1 Corinthians 2:11-12 puts it: *No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit Who is from God, **that we might understand the things freely given us by God*** (i.e. His grace). In other words, the Spirit brings you into a faith relationship with Jesus Christ where your new heart, new conviction, new attitude and desire to live in a new way are a **present reality**—no matter how long ago you experienced being *born again*! It's not just having a *born again* experience upon which to “hang your hat” but it's actually “hanging your hat” on that *born again* experience which connects you to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life everyday in a new way living.

As Lutherans we have always understood this experience to be water baptism. God gives you this rebirth in your baptism. A misunderstanding happens if you claim this one time experience in your life and then daily live as if a relationship with Jesus Christ doesn't matter at all! This is simply defining your faith by an experience rather than the on-going relationship in the Person & Work of Jesus which has been established in that experience by the Holy Spirit.

In John 3:8 Jesus used an analogy to describe how being *born again* affects our everyday living. He says: *The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.* In your life of faith as God's born again child the Holy Spirit daily desires to govern, guide and control your faith, attitudes, words and actions in God-pleasing expressions!

Although being *born again* in baptism is a one time act or experience in your life, **it is also a lifestyle** happening every single day which involves . . .

① Being connected to Christ in a special way through baptism with water and the Spirit according to His command and promise in Mark 16:16 → *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.* "Believe" is present tense referring to an on-going activity in our lives! While the Holy Spirit's work in baptism always stands firm a person who turns his back on his baptism by not believing—that is, not continuing in relationship with Jesus Christ—goes to hell. The Holy Spirit daily continues to keep us connected to Jesus in a relationship of repentance, faith and obedience through His Word and sacraments! Thus . . .

② . . . it's a lifestyle that also involves **daily** confessing your sins before God and trusting His salvation in Jesus Christ alone. As God's born again

children we need His forgiveness of sins **daily!** Maybe you memorized it this way: Baptizing with water “indicates that the old Adam in us should by **daily** contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and **daily** a new man emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” (cf. Luther’s Small Catechism, page 325, LSB)

③ It’s a lifestyle that continually seeks to be filled with the Holy Spirit, hungering to know Jesus more and more through His Word and sacraments, and serve Him in the daily vocations, conversations and relationships of your life. Thus, you can live in a whole new way where His grace and forgiveness permeates every part of your life in all experiences, past, present and future! You don’t have to let those bad experiences of the past **govern and control** how you live today because **they’ve been dealt with once and for all in the Person & Work of Jesus Christ!!** His living perfectly under God’s Law **for you**, His dying to take the punishment which your sins deserve, His rising from the dead and ascending into heaven to give you eternal life, are the experiences to which you now look for defining your living as God’s born again children today! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.