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Rick Myatt

WHERE’S THE MOTOR?

John 3:1-15

I want to start today with a few riddles. What kind of room has no doors and no windows? A mushroom. What do Alexander the Great and Winnie the Pooh have in common? Their middle name. Here’s one that’s trickier. You are hiking in Montana and you come to a fork in the trail. You know that one fork will lead you in the wrong direction, and the other will lead to your destination, but you don’t know which is the correct path. Fortunately there is a local native American man standing there who you think can direct you. However, you know there are two tribes in the area, the Whitefoot tribe, and the Blackfoot tribe. You also know the Whitefoot always speak the truth, and the Blackfoot always lie. You don’t know which tribe this man is from, so you have no idea if his answer will be truthful. If you ask him which tribe he’s from he will surely say he’s a Whitefoot, but is he truly of that tribe and telling the truth, or Blackfoot and lying about it? What can you ask him to make sure that you know which is the right path to take? I will give the answer later.

I’m asking riddles this morning as a way of introducing the passage we’re going to look at today, because in this passage Jesus talked to a man who likely thought Jesus was talking in riddles. Fortunately, Jesus will reveal the riddle for him and for us, and in so doing give us the answer to one of life’s most important questions. At the end of the sermon I will tell you the answer to that last riddle, but for now, let’s look at a very familiar story from the life of Jesus that’s found in John 3:1-15.

JESUS CONFUSED NICODEMUS

In first century Judea there were a number of competing groups just like there are in any culture. Among them were the Pharisees. They were the most respected group generally. There were between 6,000 and 7,000 Pharisees in the first century. These men studied the Law of Moses fanatically and tried to live by it. When a person became a Pharisee, he swore a solemn oath before at least 3 witnesses that he would devote every moment of his life to obeying the Ten Commandments as a way to please God.

One problem with those commandments was they were pretty general. This bothers many religious people because it leaves a lot of gray areas. Often people who are serious about their faith want everything spelled out specifically. What does it mean to honor one’s father and mother? Exactly what does not coveting mean? When the commandment says keep the Sabbath day holy, how does one do that?

So those ancient religious leaders tried to flesh that out and explain just what those laws required in as many situations they could conceive of. Keeping the Sabbath holy meant not working on that day, so you couldn’t do anything related to whatever job you had. So if you were a sailor and tying knots was part of your job, you could not tie a knot on the Sabbath. It was determined that making mortar was doing work, so you couldn’t make mortar on the Sabbath. It was decided that if you spit on dirt, that would make a little bit of mud, which was a form of mortar. Thus spitting on dirt was not permissible. Spitting on a rock was all right, because it wouldn’t make mortar.

Nicodemus was a leading Pharisee. In verse 10 Jesus said to him, “You are Israel’s teacher.” Literally he said, “You are the teacher of Israel.” Not a teacher of Israel, but the teacher. Apparently Nicodemus was at least one of, if not the, most respected leaders and teachers in the nation.

John tells us that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. I suspect that he wasn’t trying to cover up his meeting with Jesus, but he also didn’t want to be seen meeting him as though endorsing Jesus and his teaching. It is, of course, also possible that John recorded this as a detail he remembered as an eyewitness. Perhaps the only time Jesus was available was at night. Whatever the case, I guess you could say this was the first episode of “Nick at Night.”

I don’t think Nicodemus went to Jesus merely out of his own personal curiosity. Notice he said to Jesus in verse 2, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” The “we” suggests there has been discussion about Jesus among the leaders, and Nicodemus was likely there representing them. He was sent to find out more about this Jesus. Nicodemus began by showing great respect for Jesus and what he had done up to that point.

I think Nicodemus really did have respect for Jesus. There were some among the leaders of Israel who had already decided Jesus was a problem. To them he was just another untrained trouble maker and they wanted to write him off. But Nicodemus was intrigued by Jesus. In verse 2 he said, “No one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” He had heard about and seen Jesus heal people miraculously. Nicodemus could not get away from the fact that he displayed power that the leaders of Israel knew nothing about. Nic couldn’t do those things, and no one else he knew could. Whoever Jesus was, he had power from God in a very real way, power that no one else had.

Furthermore, Jesus had been saying things that likely struck a chord with Nicodemus. Plus, Jesus was reaching people that a Pharisee had no hope of reaching. Prostitutes, criminals, partiers, people at the low end of society, were never going to be reached by a Pharisee with a list of rules for them to follow. But Jesus was touching and changing lives of just such people.

Jesus cut right through the formalities and the chit chat. He said, “Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Nice segue, Jesus. That response was abrupt and unexpected. It comes totally from out of left field. Jesus was a master communicator, and in this instance he wanted to use the shock value of such an unexpected comment to rattle Nicodemus’ cage. From the outset he has Nicodemus off balance. The Pharisee got the message right up front that he was not in for a routine conversation.

Jesus went right to the heart of a matter that was big in the minds of any serious Jewish person. It was the kingdom of God. With no preamble Jesus talked about entering the kingdom of God in a bizarre way. They all wanted the kingdom of God to come and replace Rome. Being in the kingdom of God was of highest importance to them. In that statement Jesus addressed the question of how one becomes part of the kingdom of God, and his answer was radically different from anything anyone else was saying. The kingdom of God is of enormous importance to us too, though most of us are not even aware of that. I will return later to that reality.

Theologians and scholars have pointed out that the Greek word for “again” John puts in Jesus’ mouth here was one that could either mean “born from above” or “born again.” They make a strong argument that it should actually be translated “born from above,” which is how John typically used the word. However, it is apparent from Nicodemus’ response that’s how he understood it. He asked in verse 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.” Since the man who was there in the conversation understood Jesus to be saying he needed to be born again, I think that’s the way to understand it.

Most everyone in our culture is familiar with the expression “born again.” A professional athlete who re-invents himself and has a resurgence in his career is sometimes described as having a career born again. An article of clothing that has been repurposed is said to be born again. Of course, most people know the term has religious roots and refers to a particular religious experience. It is a common term today but it was not familiar to Nicodemus or anyone else in that culture. It was brand new. Nic had never heard it before, and he didn’t get it at all. He was completely confused by it. I think he was being facetious when he spoke of a grown person going back in their mother’s womb. He knew that was an absurd idea. That was a way of saying, “Born again? I don’t get it. The idea is ridiculous. I don’t understand what you’re talking about. That makes no sense. “

The idea of starting over has appeal for most of us. We all have regrets. Wouldn’t it be nice to have the slate wiped clean and be able to start all over again? Have a redo, a second chance, a mulligan on life? Sounds great. However, Laurie and I have been helping take care of our grandchildren quite a bit. Our youngest, Hunter, is not yet a toddler. It occurred to me that I would not want to have to go through his stage of life again. Carissa was feeding him a blueberry puree and he was loving it. He literally ate it up. But a few minutes later he suddenly spit a bunch of it back up. He left a big dark purple puddle on his tray, but he seemed happy as a lark nonetheless. I would not be happy if I did that. I really wouldn’t want to go through all that again. Same with Wesley, who has recently been successfully potty trained, but not without a few traumatic moments on the toilet when going number 2 resulted in protracted bouts of tears. I feel I have a special empathy and connection with Wesley now because the past few days I, too, have had a rather traumatic relationship with the porcelain throne. So I’d rather not do that again. I also really would not want to go through junior high again. So, yeah, let’s skip literally being born again and starting all over.

Jesus clarified by saying that the only way to enter the kingdom of God was to be born of water and the Spirit. Uh, that was clarifying? Apparently not for many because that statement is the source of some confusion and controversy. What did Jesus mean? Some say the water stands for physical birth and the Spirit stands for spiritual birth. But that doesn’t make a lot of sense. Why would Jesus say a person has to have a physical birth? If they haven’t had that they don’t exist. Plus there’s no indication that water stood for physical birth back then. Others have said that the water referred to baptism, but that would not have made any sense because Jesus wasn’t baptizing people. How was Nicodemus supposed to understand that?

There is a fine point of grammar that gives us a clue here. Jesus didn’t refer to two births, but one. It was one birth of water and Spirit that was needed. In the Old Testament water often symbolized cleansing and restoring, especially when linked with the Spirit. The key passage in this regard is Ezekiel 36:25-27. “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.”

Ezekiel said a time was coming when God would do a new thing, when there would be a new covenant, a new arrangement with his people in which he would work in a new and different way. This is what Jesus was talking about. This was the spiritual birth that is needed to enter into the kingdom of God. It involved God doing something remarkable and radical. It meant God forgiving a person, and changing them, putting a new heart in them. It meant God putting his Holy Spirit in a person so that individual lives in a whole new way, seeking from the inside out to do God’s will. It was a spiritual event that would transform a person starting in their heart.

Jesus was bringing an entirely different system that was the solution to that question of how to enter the kingdom of God, one that was of the Spirit, and isn’t a thing that can be done by flesh, by physical effort. Nicodemus’ entire train of thought had to do with finding the right understanding of the rules and doing a better job of keeping them. If one could only do that well, one could enter the kingdom of God. Jesus was saying that does not work.

In his commentary on John Dr. D. A. Carlson wrote, “If Nicodemus, with his knowledge, gifts, understanding, position and integrity, cannot enter the promised kingdom by virtue of his standing and works, what hope is there for anyone who seeks salvation along such lines?” He’s right, we’re not going to outdo Nicodemus.

Jesus was saying what is needed is this new system. Our son, Toby, recently got a new truck. It is a Ford F-150 Lightning. It is an electric truck. Recently he said, “Hey, Dad, let me show you something.” He took me to the front of his truck and opened what would be the hood. I thought he was going to show me the nifty mechanism that powers his new toy. I was surprised. Where the engine should be there is an empty storage compartment. His truck has no engine to fill up that space. There are no pistons, no air filter, no oil filter, no oil pan, no radiator. The truck has an electric motor and doesn’t need any of the gas engine stuff. It is an entirely different system. It runs in a totally different way. Should he run out of power he can’t pull into a gas station and fill up. You can’t put gas in his truck. You don’t have to change the oil or periodically change out the coolant. The thing just works completely differently. And that’s what Jesus was telling Nicodemus. A totally different system is needed to get one into the kingdom of God.

Jesus was saying this is what the prophet Ezekiel said would happen. It is a dramatic change into an entirely different way of living. It is not something we can manufacture or work hard to make happen. Let’s think about the analogy that Jesus purposefully chose. What part did you play when you were physically born? What did you do to make that happen? Um, it was a long time ago and I was very young, so I don’t remember exactly. Fine, let me help you. You didn’t do anything. You had nothing to do with it. You didn’t even exist. An egg in your mother was fertilized, something you had nothing to do with. An embryo that was you began to grow in your mother’s womb. After 9 months you were rudely shoved out into the scary world, literally kicking and screaming. You didn’t choose any of that. You had nothing to do with it. It was all something that happened to you.

How about being born again? The analogy holds true. It is not something that you can make happen. It is something that happens to you. Just as your parents made your birth come about, so your new birth comes about as the work of the Spirit of God. You cannot choose to make that happen by your own effort. It happens to you. If the Spirit doesn’t work, you absolutely will not be born again.

Sometimes we believers in Jesus wonder if it is possibly true that the Spirit of Christ is really in us as the Bible claims is true. We think we should feel something of him and we should be more spiritually powerful or something. If you ever wonder that, consider this, do you ever wonder if your parents actually existed? No, because if they didn’t exist, neither would you. If the Spirit didn’t work in you, you would not be born spiritually either. You would not believe in Jesus.

Jesus said this spiritual birth is a mystery we cannot completely unravel. In verse 8 he said the working of the Spirit is kind of like the working of wind. There is a play on words there in Greek. The Greek word *pneuma*, from which we get pneumonia, could mean air, breath, wind or spirit. In verse 8 Jesus punned, “The pneuma blows wherever it pleases. So it is with everyone born of the pneuma. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.” You know the wind is working, but you don’t know what, how or why it is doing it.

Wait, that’s no longer true. Meteorologists predict every day with great accuracy what the winds will be. They know what produces them and can tell us how strong they will be and what direction they will blow. That’s true, but it wasn’t in Jesus’ day. But more to the point, it isn’t totally true even today. One day Laurie and I were out for a walk and I checked the weather on my phone. It told me what direction the wind would be coming from and at what strength. But I noticed despite what my phone insisted was the wind direction, I was feeling wind coming from a different direction. And as I paid attention, I could feel the wind shift around from one direction to another at various times. It was fluky and unpredictable. Why do you get these gusts from different directions? What causes that? No one knows. Yes, we know much more about what causes wind and what it will do these days, but there is much about wind that we don’t know and can’t always predict.

Jesus’ point was we are not going to be able to understand everything about how the Holy Spirit, God’s Spirit, works and does the things he does. There is a bit of a mystery there. That should not surprise us because there is still a lot of mystery about physical birth. We know a lot, but not everything. So it is with the work of the Spirit of God.

JESUS SHOWED NICODEMUS THE WAY

Poor Nicodemus is lost at sea at this point. He doesn’t understand how this new birth thing can happen. Jesus was surprised that Nicodemus didn’t know what Jesus was talking about. He was Israel’s top expert on the Old Testament. He surely knew of Ezekiel’s prophecy. Why did he not understand what it meant?

Jesus was saying, “Nic, your system won’t work. Something dramatic, something miraculous has to happen. You have to be given a whole new life, one where everything is forgiven, and now you are a different person with a brand new heart. That can only happen as a powerful work of the Spirit of God.”

Nicodemus wanted to know how that can come about. What does it take for that to happen? In other words, how can I be born again? Jesus’ response to him is a bit cryptic, but essentially he said, “I’ve been telling you, but you and your people have not accepted what we’ve been saying. You are going to have to start believing what I say. You are going to have to listen to me and accept it.”

Then he gave Nicodemus an illustration out of the Old Testament that would perfectly summarize what he needed to do. The illustration came from a strange incident that is recorded in Numbers 21:4-9. Moses had led the people out of Egypt. They’d seen the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. God had miraculously provided them food in the wilderness. He had given them his law at Mt. Sinai. Then Moses led them to the border of Canaan. God promised to give them the land, to defeat the people living there, but the people balked. They didn’t believe they could overcome the Canaanites, and they refused to do as God told them, so he pronounced they would spend the rest of their lives in the wilderness. Since that failure they had also balked because they ran out of water, and God provided water in a miraculous way again. Then there was a rebellion against Moses that ended badly for the rebels. In Numbers 21 the people start complaining again about lack of water. They also griped about manna because they were tired of it. God had enough of their griping and rebellion, so he sent poisonous snakes among them.

They began being bitten and dying by the trainload. They recognized this for what it was. God was judging them for their rebellion after all he had done for them. So they pleaded with Moses to help them. God instructed Moses to do something bizarre. Make a statue of a snake, put it on a pole in the middle of the camp, and tell the people if they were bitten to just look at the statue. Uh, what was the medical theory behind that cure? There was no medical theory. There was a theological principle. Do what God tells you to do, trusting His provision even though it makes no sense to you, and God will use that to cure you. And it worked. As the people looked to the snake they were saved after being bitten.

This is where Jesus applies the illustration. In verses 14-15 he said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” As the people in the wilderness looked at God’s provision that was raised up among them and were saved, so now people must look at his provision, the Son of Man, meaning Jesus, lifted up among them, believe in him, and they will be saved. Looking at and trusting a snake on a stick made no sense. To many in Jesus’ day, neither did looking at and trusting a man lifted up on a cross. This is how you experience a new birth, Nicodemus. You look at me when I am lifted up and believe in me, and God will give you new life, including his kingdom for ever. That’s how you will be born again.

IMPLICATIONS

WE ALL NEED THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Nicodemus was ahead of many people in our society, because he knew he wanted and needed the kingdom of God. We don’t think about it much, many don’t think about it at all because they don’t believe in it. But the truth is that we all long for it more than we can imagine.

The kingdom of God is the place where he rules in everything. It is where what he wants is always done. A kingdom is where what the king wants is done. Because God is pure good, because he is the embodiment of love, because he is the God of peace and joy, the God of hope, where he rules there will be nothing but good, love, peace, hope and joy. Our hearts ache to be in a place where that is true.

In Acts 3:21 speaking of Jesus, Peter said, “Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” God is going to restore everything. What needs to be restored, and why does it need to be restored? One time we were over at the Stroms’ house preparing for an event that was going to happen there. Scott showed us a classic Mustang he and his son were working on. I have always loved the classic Mustangs. They were well along in the process of putting that car back in its original state. It had once been shiny and new, but then became old and in need of much repair. They worked to fix it. It was beautiful. It was an old vehicle that needed a lot of care. They had provided that and were restoring it, making it like it was when it was new.

Peter was saying that God is going to make everything the way it was when it was new. Why does everything need to be made like it used to be? That’s because it is not as it was originally designed. There is a truth we all like to avoid thinking about because it is so depressing. It is that life, as it is now, is tragic. No life in this world has a happy ending. Every single life ends with sadness. My recent experience has confronted me with the reality that I have a disease that has potential for ending my life. They tell me that the treatment I am receiving at least has a chance of defeating that disease, though there are no guarantees. But as I thought about that I realized the best case scenario is I get past this disease, and then in 10, 15, 20 years or so, I’m back facing that same prospect in one way or another. I hope this treatment works, because I am not ready for this to end. But I realized, no matter when it comes, it is quite likely I will not be ready for it to end. It will be sad.

The first supposed noble truth of Buddhism is “existence is suffering.” It teaches that the underlying reality of life is suffering. Psychologist William Berry in an article in *Psychology Today* wrote, “underneath everything there is emptiness and isolation.” He quotes another counselor who says it is when we feel fulfilled that we are deluded. It means we are just trying to distract ourselves from reality.

This was not God’s original design for life. Remember, God’s will is for good, love, peace and joy to be the underlying reality of life, not suffering. Being in the kingdom of God means being freed of that existence ruled by suffering. In Colossians 1:12-13 Paul described it as being rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into God’s “kingdom of light.” Every human being wants that. There is no process, no plan, no program, no pleasure, no possession in this world that can restore all things, that can rescue us from the dominion of darkness and suffering, and bring us into the kingdom of light.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, and to us, you must be born again. You need that work of God that will bring you into his kingdom. The way you get that is you look to Jesus, you believe in him. That’s it? That’s too easy, isn’t it? Well, I ask again, what did you do to bring about your physical birth? God has given a way to enter his kingdom that any and every human being can do. Even the weakest, youngest, worst of us, can look at Jesus and believe in God’s provision. So can the strongest, oldest and best of us.

JESUS GIVES NEW LIFE BY FAITH

This means more than you have hope after you die. If that was all it meant it would be the most valuable thing you could ever gain, the most important thing you could ever have. But it means more than that. When a creature is born it is given life, a brand new life. When Jesus says we can be born again, he meant we are given a new life, a different kind of life from what we had before. And that life begins the moment we are born. The moment we look to Jesus to restore us, we have new life.

That new life is the life of the kingdom of God. Whatever is going on around us, his kingdom is inside us. He is king, and as we live with him as king our interior world becomes that world of goodness, hope, love, peace and joy. We experience that to the degree we let him be king.

Darrell Johnson is a pastor and seminary professor. He tells a story about early in his ministry when he took over as the pastor of a church that was a total mess. He learned even some of the leaders of the church were not actually believers in Jesus, and there was tremendous turmoil. One Sunday he preached a sermon from Colossians about how Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the one through whom all things were created. After the sermon one of the leaders, a woman, came to him very angry and said, “You can’t say that about Jesus.” He said, “I didn’t. Paul did. I’m repeating his words.” She was so angry he said, “Why don’t you come see me in my office.” She made an appointment and came to see him. He said they had quite a conversation. It was lively. Finally he said to her, “Why don’t you go home and read the gospel of John and pray this prayer: Jesus, if you are who this text says you are, then make yourself real to me.” She said, “That’s crazy.” He said, “Well, can you just try it, and then we’ll see where we can go from there?” She agreed. Two weeks later she came back to see him and he could tell as soon as she walked into the office there was something different about her. She said to him, “I don’t know what this born again stuff is about, but I think it happened to me.” He found that interesting because he had never used the term “born again.” He said, “Why do you think that?” She said, “Because I know you’re right about Jesus, and I love him.” He said she was a completely different person. She had a new life. Within a month her husband also came to that same place, shortly after that two good friends did the same, and it sparked a revolution in the church.

To have this new life is to have our hearts, our lives, be the place where God rules. It is to have his goodness, his love, his peace, his joy invading every part of our being. It is to have the emptiness filled, to have a life whose underlying reality is not suffering, but hope. The more we live by faith in Jesus, the more we let God rule in our hearts, the more this life will be manifested in us.

WE NEED TO LET THE SPIRIT WORK

Nicodemus had a deeply ingrained framework of theology. He thought he knew who God is, how he works, and what we need to do. Jesus threw a grenade into that structure and blew it apart. He said that Nicodemus, and all of us, need, an unexpected, unexplainable work of the Holy Spirit of God that is not confined to our ideas and our theology.

He said the Holy Spirit works in ways we don’t comprehend. He’s like the wind. Way back in the 1960’s there was a hit song written by Donovan Leitch called *Catch The Wind*. It expressed desires then repeated the line, “Ah, but I may as well try and catch the wind,” admitting they are hopeless, because one can’t catch the wind.

I have seen too often Christians trying to find and work at what they think are the steps to creating a new life. There is a fundamental and fatal flaw in that approach. It was the one Jesus blew up when he talked to Nicodemus. We can’t create new life. We can’t give ourselves new birth. We can only look to Jesus and believe that his Spirit can and will if we will only trust him.

We need to believe that the Spirit of Jesus is very real, very powerful and that he wants to work in our lives and our world. We need to invite him to do so and look for his work in our lives. We need to expect him to work, but to expect he will do things in ways we would never anticipate. We should look for what he is doing, then join him in it, whatever it is.

Here's the answer to the riddle I posed in the introduction. You ask your native American friend, “If you were from the other tribe, which path would you tell me is the right one to take?” Then you do the opposite of whatever he says. If he’s a truthful Whitefoot, he will honestly tell you the truth about what a Blackfoot would say, which would be a lie directing you down the wrong path. If he’s a lying Blackfoot he will lie about what a Whitefoot would say, which would be to direct you to the correct path, thus leading you to the wrong trail. By doing the opposite you will find the right path.

I’m a truthful Whitefoot, and I tell you the way to new birth, new life, and living a kingdom life, is continually looking to Jesus, believing his Spirit is present, is powerful and will work in you and in your world.