

Being Who You Already Are: Finding Your Place in World Change

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 January 2025

Preacher: Matt Collinson

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Welcome, welcome. It's so good to see you all this Sunday morning. So my name's Matt. I'm a part of the preaching team here at the table.

And it's been a week. So before we start, I do want to acknowledge that, that we're in the middle of this sermon series that's looking at new beginnings in the Gospel of John.

But for a lot of us, for a lot of reasons, this week has been a new beginning of a pretty rough kind. We've seen federal agents raid a Chicago elementary school.

We've seen equal rights protections rolled back or abolished. We've seen our trans siblings having their very identity questioned from the desk of the Oval Office. And I don't want us to breeze past these things.

I really appreciated the prayer that we had earlier. I think that captured a lot of where. where we've come from and also where I hope we're going to go today. Because I think our passage from the Gospel of John gives us some hope, some encouragement, and some application for how we get through the world that we currently find ourselves in.

[1 : 13] So you found us this week in roughly the middle of our series looking at the early life of Jesus through the Gospel of John. And we're exploring this idea of new beginnings, new creation that's revealed through the life of Jesus.

To give a quick recap of where we've come from, as several people have shared in their sermons already, the Gospel of John is not meant to be sort of a chronological timeline of the life of Jesus. It's set out to give, to introduce us to who Jesus is, to the themes of his life and his ministry, and then build on those as we go through the book. The end goal being not to give an accurate chronology of the life of Jesus, but so that when we finish it, we may believe that he's the Messiah. So in the first chapter of John, Pastor Tanetta a couple of weeks ago spoke about Jesus being revealed as the chosen one. The one of God, sent by God, into the world.

And in chapter 2, we saw Jesus announce himself publicly for the very first time at a wedding in Cana, where he rescued from potential shame and disgrace a young bride's family by creating literally gallons of wine out of jars of water.

[2 : 28] And then last week, we saw Jesus in the temple courtyard, making a whip and taking a stand against the excess and abuses of the wealthy and powerful who were dishonoring the temple and using it to extract profit from the poor.

So in the first three chapters, or the first two chapters of John, we've seen Jesus reveal himself to be a worker of miracles, a defender of the powerless, and potentially a problem for the systems of the rich and the powerful.

So I want us to keep those themes in mind, that Jesus is God, that Jesus is here to redeem the powerless, and to stand against the excesses and evils of empire, as we read through today's passage, which is John chapter 3, verses 1 through 21.

I'm going to read it from the NIV, but it's pretty similar in, I imagine, most of your versions. So beginning at verse 1. Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

He came to Jesus at night, and he said, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs that you were doing if God were not with him.

[3 : 38] And Jesus replied, Very truly I tell you that no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. How can someone be born again when they are old?

Nicodemus asked. Surely they cannot enter the second time their mother's womb to be reborn. And Jesus answered, Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and of the Spirit.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You should not be surprised by my saying you must be born again. The wind blows where it pleases. We hear its sound, but we cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

So it is with people born of the Spirit. But how can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and you do not understand these things?

Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. [4 : 42] How then will you believe if I speak to you of heavenly things? For no one has gone to heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

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

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands already condemned, because they have not believed in the name of God's Son. This then is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but the people love darkness instead of the light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

But whoever lives in the truth comes into the light so that it may be plainly seen that what they are doing has been done in the sight of God. So some of the themes that we talked about in John 1 and John 2 are reinforced in this passage, we see several assertions to this idea that Jesus is God.

[6 : 05] He explicitly declares himself as the one who came from God in verse 14. And in verse 17, we see almost an annotation of the story of the wedding at Canaan. Jesus didn't come to condemn the newly married couple or the world, but instead to save the world or the wedding through him.

And there are also several reminders that Nicodemus, this teacher of Israel, that despite his power, his status, his authority, his learning, was not automatically entitled to see the kingdom of heaven, but instead, like literally all of us, had to be born again.

So this brings us into the two themes that I want to look at today. And there's two questions I want to answer or two questions I want to explore. And they're basically wrapped up in this one idea of why did Jesus come?

We've seen him revealed. We've seen him stand against the powerful and stand with the powerless. But to what end? What's he here to do? And I think if we look at John 3, we see two ideas to answer.

So firstly, the first theme is this idea of being born again. From verse 3, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they're born again. And then secondly, the second idea that I think Jesus is trying to get across here is in verse 17.

[7 : 23] For God didn't send his son into the world to condemn it, but to save the world through him. Or to paraphrase, Jesus' mission on earth is the rebirth and redemption of his people and the redemption of the world.

So let's take the first question first, which we shared on our Instagram story, because literally everyone on the table's leadership is millennial, so we don't understand TikTok and are too old for Facebook. What does it mean, then, to be born again?

So I want to start with a story. Has anyone been to the QCF conference in the past? I realize this is the wrong audience because QCF is literally this weekend. If you haven't been, I strongly recommend you go, and Bacola did not ask me to say that.

Next year. It's happening right now. So the reason I bring up QCF, for those of you that haven't been, is that every conference, usually on the Saturday evening, there's a space that's sort of loosely called sharing time.

And it's basically an open mic for people to share their stories of their journey of reconciling their queerness with their Christian faith, of finding one or the other or both through a person or a place.

[8 : 43] As I was thinking about this question of what does it mean to be born again, in my mind, I went back to being sat in a large conference room in a hotel in downtown Chicago in, I think,

January of 2019, and there was this line of people who were sharing their stories of faith, of discovering themselves, of reconciling these ideas of their queerness with their faith.

And while I strongly believe in the idea that stories are sacred and I'm not going to stand up here and share other people's testimonies with you, as I reflected on sort of the sum of these stories, I thought about the theme that they all had in common.

And that is that all of these people as they stood up shared this sort of sense of finding peace, themselves, their identity, when they were able to shake off the shame and the fear that they felt the conflict in their minds between these two seemingly diametrically opposed ideas, and they were able to find a way to truly live into who they were.

These were stories of people who'd been born again, who'd encountered the spirit of God, been freed from their shame, their fear, and stepped into the wholeness of themselves.

They'd become what they already were. New life through Jesus is literally becoming what we already are. There's something deeply profound about breaking the rules of English grammar, right?

[10:14] You say something that clearly doesn't make any sense and everyone's like, oh, that's profound. So how can this be? How does this make sense? So there's a part of the answer in the final verse of this passage, in verse 21, where Jesus says that whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be plainly seen that what they've done has been done in the sight of God.

And in 2 Timothy, the writer reminds us that we've not been given from God a spirit of fear or of shame. And so I want to suggest that a part of this rebirth that Jesus is talking about is letting go of shame and fear, giving up the control of shame and fear in our lives.

We step into the open, we stop hiding ourselves or the parts of ourselves that we're ashamed of or that we don't love about ourselves, and we bring them into view. When we're reborn by water and of the spirit, our shame is washed away and we own who we are and can step into what we shall be. A couple of words of caution here. I don't believe that anywhere in Scripture we are given a spirit of oversharing. Some people are not safe.

Some people do not need to know the parts of us that we're not proud of. Some of these parts that we've been ashamed of that we've hidden for so long need to be carefully nurtured, drawn out by those who are close to us, by therapists, by loving community, by survivors of similar pain.

[11:44] Not being ashamed of ourselves does not mean that we're ready to be an open book everywhere we go, but it instead, I think, removes this internal desire to hide. If you've ever sort of looked inside yourself and recoiled from what you've seen, this idea of freedom from shame, I think, is more stepping away from that internal recoil.

But not everyone should get all of us. And I think it's also important to highlight that freedom from shame doesn't necessarily mean that we get to avoid the thing we're ashamed of.

Some of us have done shameful things. Rebirth isn't a hall pass or an avoidance of consequences. It's an honest owning of who we are, what we've done, and how we're going to move forward.

If you think of, for example, 12-step recovery groups that sort of operate on this, ideally at least, sort of space of no judgment, that's a place where you won't be shamed, but also those groups are set up to help the people that come in change.

No one is going into those 12-step spaces and saying, I wish to remain exactly as I am. We go in, or you go in, with a goal to change. So the work of the spirit, I think, as we realize our freedom from shame is to confront, convict, and challenge us to grow.

[13:05] It's not a sitting back and being comfortable with exactly where we are. It's realizing who we are, what we are called to be, and driving us towards that place. That's what rebirth, I think, looks like.

To give a little bit of a tortured analogy, if anyone's ever met a newborn, they don't stay a newborn. And if they do, that's a problem. We want them to grow.

And so this idea of rebirth is not a static thing. It's not a one prayer, one and done. Rebirth is about leaning into growth, relying on God's spirit to lead us to who we were meant to be and where we were meant to be, to grow in the fruits of the spirit.

And I also don't want to pretend that this is some sort of formula. This isn't something that just happens, right? You don't, you know, be born again and like, here's this magical upward trajectory of our lives.

Sometimes following Jesus is literally the exact opposite of a walk in the park. If you want to see what following Jesus can look like, look at the early church. They were ostracized, imprisoned, beaten, killed for their faith.

[14 : 14] And even for us here today, the path of following Jesus might not be adored with glory and accolades and peace, but with real tangible loss. And that's why community is so important.

If we're following Jesus into who we're meant to be, we need people around us. We cannot do this alone. And part of the reason we can't do this alone is that our rebirth is the first step into following Jesus and joining him in the work that he came to do, which is the second part of John 3, encapsulated by verse 17.

For God didn't send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it through him. So firstly, not condemning the world hits a little different this week.

How do we not condemn a world where trans siblings are erased, where ICE raids are starting, where decades-long protections are being eroded? This needs to be loudly condemned.

This needs to be continuously condemned. But one of the things that we see when we look at, say, chapter 2, which Pastor Teneda talked about last week, when Jesus cleared the courtrooms in the temple or the courtyard of the temple, he didn't stop at condemnation.

[15 : 31] He moved to action. And we can't just throw rocks from the sidelines. We can't just give up. Jesus didn't come to condemn the world.

He came to save it. Well, if you think of a building that's condemned, condemned literally means we've given up on it. We're going to bulldoze it. It cannot be saved. Jesus is warning us or telling us very clearly, the world is not condemned.

We cannot give up on the world. Jesus didn't come to condemn it, but to save it. Any good organizer will tell you that you need to name the problem.

So again, this caution against condemnation is not a, let's not name the problem, let's just move straight to action. We have to name the problem. We have to condemn the problem. But then we have to work towards the redemption and saving of the world that we're in.

It's going to be a lot of hopelessness, a lot of fear over the next few years. But I think it's important that Jesus reminds us that our role is not to condemn, but to find our place in renewal.

[16 : 37] And I think we, it can sound a little tone deaf, right? Let's talk about salvation of the world and redemption in the space that we're all in.

But I think this is exactly the right time to be talking about that. We have to be thoughtful in this moment. Who's stepping up? How are we stepping up?

How do we organize and strategize? How do we care and pray for our neighbors and community? But also stay reminded that these battles that we're fighting are not against people.

They're against principalities and powers of the world. I think Pastor Anthony talked about that back end of last year. Jesus' criticism when he was on earth targeted the religious leaders and the Roman Empire alike.

I'd certainly not say that the occupant of the White House doesn't impact our work to renew or redeem God's world, but we aren't going to get there anymore yesterday than we are today or tomorrow. Our role is the redemption and renewal of the world.

[17 : 43] And I know it's hard when we're in D.C. to put politics completely to one side, but the work continues regardless of who's in the White House. I think it's also important to remember that we are not called to save the world.

We are called to partner with God in the redemption of the world. We all have a role in the renewal of all things, but none of us are the Savior.

None of us are the one that is called to do it ourselves. Part of the thing that I really believe about following Jesus is that as we follow Jesus we start to see our heart break for the things that he cares about.

And not all of us are going to feel the same way. Not all of us are going to see the same problems and feel moved to act. And that's okay. And as much as I would love to I can't stand up here and tell you exactly what your role in the redemption of the world is.

Obviously it's doing the work that I do which is caring about the criminal justice system and if you're not doing that then you're wrong. But maybe there are others that have different focuses because our heart breaks for what Jesus has put on our heart and that's a part of that rebirth growing in the spirit and following him.

[18 : 58] But in order to not just leave you with this vague go figure out what it is you're supposed to do I want to give us a couple of examples from the life of Nicodemus beyond the conversation that he has with Jesus which may help us think about some of our role in this redemption of the world.

So firstly if you notice going back to the passage the conversation with Nicodemus doesn't really seem to end. Nicodemus asks a question Jesus responds Nicodemus asks another question and then if this was in a public place you'd sort of imagine that somewhere around verse 10 or 11 Jesus stops talking to Nicodemus over here and talks to the world and says very truly I tell you but it's only the two of them.

Nicodemus at some point clearly leaves the conversation but we see him again a couple of times in John's gospel. We see him firstly in chapter 7 so at the end of chapter 7 the Jewish leaders are attempting to circumvent justice they're trying to arrest Jesus for causing a problem for basically undermining their authority and Nicodemus stands up and he says hold up we have a law against doing this you can't just arrest someone without a charge you can't just arrest someone because you're pissed at them.

It's not a particularly radical act in the grand scheme of things Jesus still gets arrested at the end of his life but the point here is that Nicodemus is standing up to his colleagues he's standing up against injustice he's preventing the people around him from breaking the law maybe some of us can do that and then we meet Nicodemus again in John 19 Jesus has just been executed by the Romans and Nicodemus along with another gentleman Joseph of Arimathea support the grieving family by taking Jesus' body down from the cross preparing his body for burial providing a ritual spices and linens and laying Jesus to rest in a tomb here we see Nicodemus supporting a grieving family caring for those who'd lost someone stepping in to cover practicalities when others can't maybe some of us can do that and then finally early church history suggests that eventually because of his faith in Jesus

Nicodemus was kicked out of the ruling Jewish council instead of sacrificing his principles to remain in power he suffered a great personal and professional loss instead of a life of luxury and honor his later years were likely spent in anonymity and possibly isolation and I hope it doesn't come to that but maybe some of us can do that too and I don't want to pretend that these are exhaustive examples of how we join God in their renewal of all things but as we wrestle with the past week and the weeks to come I think Nicodemus represents a useful guide and as we wrap up I want to remind us of something that Pastor Tanetta shared with us last week that we need to rise to this moment and I want to add to that and say that us finding our place in the work of renewal is not an opportunity to sit on the sidelines and wait for the perfect moment we're not waiting for a personalized invitation to step up where all of our gifts can be brought to bear no one's body is uniquely calibrated to resist tear gas but we all have a role in protecting the vulnerable no one's temperament is uniquely reborn of the spirit to survive the poverty of losing your job for disobeying an illegal order but we might have to take that step no one's calling no one's role in redemption is too great or too high to prevent us from cleaning out a kitchen picking up trash being born again means knowing ourselves knowing that we are part of

[22 : 53] God's renewal plan not the main character not the savior but not an observer we have an active role to play our rebirth is the announcement of our willingness to join God in the renewal of all things and our life and our growth is that participation so to conclude I want to reassure us that God's radical renewal of creation starts with our own transformation starts with our own discovery of who we are where we fit in the role of the body of Christ finding where our gifts join with the gifts and dreams of God and God's people and to join God's people in living out God's vision for a renewed creation I loved the line from the prayer to heal ourselves is to heal the world let's pray Jesus you came into a world ruled by empire with so much that people wanted to stand against and you showed us and showed us showed your people how to resist how to fight how to care for each other as we go into this week I pray that you would be with us as we step out into the world renewed and transformed by you to join you in the renewal of the world

Amen through the world