

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Nicodemus: Convection”

Dr. Jay Howell

John 3:5-8

August 25, 2024

We continue our walk through one particular chapter of the Gospel of John, chapter three, one exchange between Jesus and this man Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader among the people, who came to Jesus by night with questions, with doubt, but also with an undeniable pull to know more about this Jesus and what he was saying.

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The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, your ways are inscrutable, moving around us, within us, and through us, at times imperceptibly, at others unmistakably. Move anew among us this day, and by your Word stir a new work in our midst. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

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At that point Nicodemus must've had a dumbfounded look on his face, because Jesus adds, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above [or born anew or born again].'"

Honestly Nicodemus has plenty of good reasons to be confused at this point, but to be fair, it's not like Jesus is dodging the question. So much of what Jesus teaches his followers only made sense to them long after the fact, after the realities of his death and resurrection were in front of them, and perhaps more to the point of what he's talking about here, after the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

And through that lens, Jesus is talking about a spiritual rebirth. What's born of the flesh is flesh, that is, in one's physical birth, that's what you would expect. You wouldn't expect a dog to give birth to a cat. You wouldn't expect an emotional or spiritual birth or rebirth when one is physically born—that's not what's going on. But what is born of Spirit, that is, in one's spiritual birth, something else is happening. So to be born from above, or born anew or born again, it's one's spiritual rebirth, being born of the Spirit, one's new start in entering, in seeing the kingdom of God.

The problem is, none of that would make a whole lot of sense at the time. So Nicodemus is probably okay in still being a bit confused and wearing that confusion on his face.

So Jesus throws in even more mystery: "The 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." A bit of wordplay going on here. As it happens, and you may have noted a footnote in your Bibles about this, the words for "wind" and "spirit" (and "breath" too, while we're at it) are all the same. So you can just as easily read some of these sentences as, "The *Spirit* blows where it chooses," "The *wind* blows where it chooses." In other words, what Jesus is saying here, is that in the same way that we don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes, we don't know how the Spirit operates either, and therefore these notions of spiritual rebirth, of spiritual renewal, of being born of water and Spirit, of being born from above, born anew, born again, aren't entirely within our ability to understand, much less predict.

"So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." But this obviously belongs in another time, because at risk of bursting Jesus' bubble, we know where wind comes from now.

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And charted out across the globe, we can track the patterns for all of it. There tend to be high pressure systems across roughly 30 degrees latitude north and south (for us, that's in Florida), and from them the air moves toward the equator westward. Similarly on the other sides of those systems, farther from the equator, the air moves away from the equator eastward. It's why when there are hurricanes, south of us, closer to the equator, they tend to develop and move across the ocean westward, but it's also why weather patterns tend to move in the opposite direction eastward across the United States. It gets more complicated when you start talking about jet streams, ocean currents, mountain ranges, El Ninos, and climate change, and all that, but in general that's what happens across the globe.

Bet you didn't think you were going to get a meteorology lesson today. But it's all just convection, the movement of colder, higher density air toward warmer, lower density air. And where do all these high pressure and low pressure areas come from and why do they move around the way they do? Long story short, it's because the sun shines and the earth spins.

There. Mystery solved. That's where wind comes from. It's because the sun shines and the earth spins. So no need for Nicodemus to fret any further about this being born from above, born again, born of the Spirit, born of the wind, because now we know where the wind actually comes from.

In fact, no need for us to really worry much either. Were you hoping to sense what Jesus meant by being born again, born of the Spirit, some kind of religious renewal in your life? Don't bother. It's just a combination of genetics and sociology. There's something about the human condition, something engrained at a genetic level about the human mind, something about the way the synapses connect, that makes us inclined toward the abstract, to what we would call the religious or the spiritual. Then you get a bunch of people inclined in a similar way together, and they start coming up with ways to sync up what they feel, what they think, what they believe, and like wind blowing in a certain direction, these beliefs start to coalesce. You get folks thinking the same way, behaving the same way. You get people influencing their friends, leaders influencing their citizens or subjects, parents influencing their children. Mystery behind spiritual experience? Not quite. It's all just genetics and sociology.

So we don't need this Jesus anymore or the new birth he invites us into. Does that resonate with anyone? I think for some, myself included—I can be a bit of a cynic—there can be something appealing about deconstructing anything remotely spiritual, anything that might suggest there's something more than the strictly physical, scientific, observable reality. Something supernatural? Eh, it's just people's brains acting funny together.

Are you inclined toward that sort of thought? It can be a good thing. Shows a mind earnestly seeking after truth. And here you are. Listening, curious, like Nicodemus showing up at night.

Now don't hear me wrong, please. This is not a sermon about how bad science or scientific progress is. It is a good thing that, in the seeking after the truth of creation, we have a better understanding about weather patterns, about sociology, about the cosmos on a galactic scale, about the atom on a microscopic scale, about the human condition, about genetics, about the mind, about the body.

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And if you were to hope for this renewal, this rebirth in your own life, do not worry. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it.

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In fact, no need for us to really worry much either. Were you hoping to sense what Jesus meant by being born again, born of the Spirit, some kind of religious renewal in your life? Don't bother. It's just a combination of genetics and sociology. There's something about the human condition, something engrained at a genetic level about the human mind, something about the way the synapses connect, that makes us inclined toward the abstract, to what we would call the religious or the spiritual. Then you get a bunch of people inclined in a similar way together, and they start coming up with ways to sync up what they feel, what they think, what they believe, and like wind blowing in a certain direction, these beliefs start to coalesce. You get folks thinking the same way, behaving the same way. You get people influencing their friends, leaders influencing their citizens or subjects, parents influencing their children. Mystery behind spiritual experience? Not quite. It's all just genetics and sociology.

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In fact, no need for us to really worry much either. Were you hoping to sense what Jesus meant by being born again, born of the Spirit, some kind of religious renewal in your life? Don't bother. It's just a combination of genetics and sociology. There's something about the human condition, something engrained at a genetic level about the human mind, something about the way the synapses connect, that makes us inclined toward the abstract, to what we would call the religious or the spiritual. Then you get a bunch of people inclined in a similar way together, and they start coming up with ways to sync up what they feel, what they think, what they believe, and like wind blowing in a certain direction, these beliefs start to coalesce. You get folks thinking the same way, behaving the same way. You get people influencing their friends, leaders influencing their citizens or subjects, parents influencing their children. Mystery behind spiritual experience? Not quite. It's all just genetics and sociology.

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SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Nicodemus: Convection”

Dr. Jay Howell

John 3:5-8

August 25, 2024

We continue our walk through one particular chapter of the Gospel of John, chapter three, one exchange between Jesus and this man Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader among the people, who came to Jesus by night with questions, with doubt, but also with an undeniable pull to know more about this Jesus and what he was saying.

Last week, we found Nicodemus raising questions regarding what Jesus meant by one being “born from above” or “born again.” And now we find Jesus clarifying what he meant, but I wonder just how clarifying it actually is. Let’s go to God’s Word together. John 3:5-8.

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The 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.”

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