“Invitation to Life”

John 3:1-21

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The following story comes from the Rev. Dr. David Van Dyke. He was the pastor of the House of Hope Presbyterian church in St. Paul, MN where I did my seminary internship. He was the co-moderator of the covenant network of Presbyterians and there he worked with many churches that were struggling to work on including LGBT folks into their churches. It wasn’t the kind of thing that you would expect in a small rural Presbyterian church in Wisconsin. The parents of four-year-old Jason came to their pastor with quite the unexpected story. The young parents approached their pastor and shared that Jason just seemed different. He wasn’t himself. He cried all of the time. He was very attached to his mother and seemed almost fearful. One day his mother took him in her lap and said, “what’s wrong Jason?” The four year old little boy looked up at his mother and asked, “Can I climb back up inside of you so I can come out right?” Completely stunned, the mother hugged him tighter and insisted that he was just right. He was perfect. “No” Jason said, “I’m not right.”

Jason and the family entered much needed therapy and counseling to figure out what was going on. After this thorough and lengthy process, it was determined that Jason was most likely transgendered. Most of us have a family member or at least know someone who is gay. But only 37% of people say they know a transgendered person. Popular culture has shown us some people who are like Laverne Cox from the series Orange is the New Black or Caitlin Jenner. Transgender is an umbrella term for those whose gender identity differs from what is typically associated with their sex assigned at birth. Gender identity is someone’s internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman. For transgender people, the sex their were assigned at birth and their own internal gender don’t match. This is why many choose to bring their bodies into alignment with their gender identity. I know this is a very controversial topic, I am not trying to tell you how to think about it at this point and time. When I was in the church hearing David preach this sermon, you could hear a pin drop. This was one of those few sermons in my life that I can remember with such clarity. I wanted to convey the feelings that I felt that day. That this sermon was so powerful and I felt like I left that church a different person then when I came in.

Every time I read this passage for today, it brings me back to this passage. It probably always will. “Can one enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?” That church had many questions about how is this going to work? How will we care for this child? They probably had many answers. Which is not all that different from Nicodemus. He thought he had the answers to as he came to Jesus on that night.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He came to visit Jesus at night. This was typically a time when Rabbis would get together and discuss scripture. So it would be perfectly natural to go see Jesus at night. He may also went at night so he would not be noticed by others of the establishment. Tradition seems to think that he was one of the Jewish leaders who believed in Jesus, but did not confess him openly for fear of excommunication. Later on he defends Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin and he assisted Joseph of Arimathea with the burial of Jesus. So he says to Jesus, “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.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Or it could be translated born anew or born again. Nicodemus basically says I have seen the evidence and figured it out, I know who you are. Jesus responds, “You have no idea who I am.”

Nicodemus jumps into the how question. Just as many of us would. How does this work? How can anyone be born after growing old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born? Give us Presbyterians a problem and we will come up with answers. Even before we have thought the question through. This whole born from above or born-again thing makes us uncomfortable. What does that even mean. It seems that our evangelical brothers and sisters have this figured out. They know the exact date that they were born again. For them, a salvation or a born again experience in teenage years or adulthood is necessary. A sort of I was lost and then I was found event. Not a vocabulary that we are used to as Presbyterians. We always say that we were saved 2000 years ago. When I am with pastors who say we need to reach the unsaved, I usually stay quiet and roll my eyes. Maybe some of us have had a born-again experience. Nothing wrong with that. I have always wanted that mountain top moment. For many of us those conversion stories confuse us. Maybe we have never felt away from the presence of God. There had been no need for us to have a conversion experience. For some, maybe the conversion experience is what they needed. They felt forsaken by God, they were perhaps on the wrong path. That experience turned their lifes around. Made them life for God and for their neighbors. A good thing. Perhaps this is why John is intentionally vague. It doesn’t say how this born from above experience is going to happen. It just does.

From these questions Jesus answers, “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 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 yet 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. Again, not a very clear answer. How can these things be? Nicodemus pleads. Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things, Jesus retorts.

The passage moves on to more explanation. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. Brings us back to our old testament lesson for this morning. The people of Israel were impatient on their way to the Red Sea. They were complaining once again. “Why have you brought us out of the land of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we detest this miserable food.” Then the Lord brings poisonous snakes among the people. Those snakes bit many people and they died. Which brings up the question, why did God bring snakes to kill people? That is a different sermon for a different day. It at least made them realize that they blasphemed God. They came to Moses and asked him to pray for them. God said to Moses to make a serpent and place it on a pole. Everyone who has been bitten shall look at it and live. So that symbol became a symbol for Israel and it was placed with the arc of the covenant. Likewise, Jesus need to be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

When I was in Beckley for the summer of 2013 leading mission trips I saw these signs everywhere for a tent revival. I had never been to a tent revival and could only imagine what they would be like. I assumed there would be a tent, lots of loud music and some crazy preaching. So I gathered my staff and we went over there one afternoon. Sure enough we come upon a tent on a hillside. There is a preaching stage, and organ and some people sitting on folding chairs. A couple of songs are sung and the preacher heads to the stage. It looked like the second coming of Moses. A guy with a long white beard comes onto the stage and I was wondering where his serpent staff was. Another guy blows a shofar, which is one of those ancient horns that Israelites blew. It looked like the gjallhorn that they blow at the Vikings games. “Moses” begins preaching and it is a mile a minute. I have no idea what he was talking about since he was preaching so fast. It was full of emotion. He was going on for more than an hour. During the sermon another guy comes up and gives us a little coin, On the coin it says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” So we may have not gotten that message through the sermon, but we got it on the coin.

John 3:16 is probably the most popular Bible verse out there. Even if you had never been in church or read the bible, you would know it. This is the verse you see on signs at football games and written on the cleats of the players. We often say that God loves everybody no matter what. Well it never says that anywhere in the Bible. This is as close as it gets. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. God is not contractually obligated to love the world. God does it because God wants to. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. That is the best we get. But look at what comes right after that. Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world and people loved darkness more than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

So, what about the people who don’t believe? In John, the world is very black and white or in his words, dark or light. There is no middle ground. You’re either on the train or you are off. Remember that the Johannine community that he is writing to is a marginal group. They don’t have much power at the end of the first century. So it would make sense that they are a very dualistic group. You are either with us or you’re not. Neutrality or indecisiveness are not allowed. So what about you? What decision are you going to make? We Presbyterians like to say that we are a predestined people. Predestined to salvation, so we don’t need to worry about this stuff. But what about in the here and now? Will we go to the light and expose the evil in our midst? We realize that some people will just never come to the light. If it is of their own choice or it is predestined to happen we can never say for sure. Some people just seemed predisposed to sin and evil. God sent God’s son into the world, and with that sending the separations of dark and light happened because he came. Not because Jesus made these separations. Some people are going to like what he does and what he says and some won’t. Just the way it is.

So is it born again? Or born again and again and again? I think the latter. The new wind of God is constantly blowing. Changing us, reforming us. Where it comes from or where it will take us we do not know. Where will that Spirit take us. Pray about that this lent. Where can the spirit’s new wind take us? Where can it lead us using the gifts that we have? Think of the church that little Jason attends. His hair began to grow longer. They had classes on what the situation was about. How to talk about it with their children. To the amazement of everyone, the situation worked beautifully with little disruption. Everyone felt swept up with the spirit and with that family. One day Jason became known as Jenny and she was accepted at where she was at. Where the family was at. For sure, it will be difficult and many decisions will need to be made as Jenny grows up. But that church will be with her.

Have you ever had your heart melted or softened? Have you ever changed your mind when you vowed not to? Have you ever felt yourself moving down a new path? One that surprises you because you never thought you would be going down that road. Maybe you discovered that it isn’t as scary as you thought it would be. You don’t feel alone. That may be part of being born again and again and again.

To be born again and again and again is to trust in the Spirit. To trust in the God who gave us birth and life. The one that gave his son so that whoever believes may have eternal life. That is a powerful love. A life-giving love. Will we accept that invitation? To be willing to be open to where the Spirit will lead us. Even when we don’t know where it is coming from or where it will lead us? Can we trust in that love that God has for us? Trusting in that mysterious wind that blows that we cannot control? Let go and believe it. Amen.

**John 3:1-21**

3Now 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. 16“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

## Numbers 21:4-9

4From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” 6Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” 9So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.