

# Born from Above

John 3:1-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

March 5, 2023/Second Sunday of Lent

---

Last Sunday I mentioned that each Sunday during Lent there would be an opportunity for members of our congregation to share from their own stories on the theme of the morning.

This week, we couldn't find anyone to do so. So, you're stuck listening to my stories again. 😊

This story won't be so much about any one-off personal experience of "new birth" as a story about how the theme has grown in importance in my thinking over the last few years.

In November 2022 I wrote a blog post called "Thick Like Honey, Sweet Like Grace."

You might think that I'm better at coming up with titles for my blog posts than my sermons. Alas, you would be mistaken.

I stole the title from a quote in Matthew Perry's recent memoir. You remember Matthew Perry, right? He is the Canadian actor who skyrocketed to global superstardom by playing Chandler Bing from the massively popular 90's show *Friends*.

Perry's biography is a quite harrowing tale of addiction. Of feeling abandoned by his parents. Of feeling desperately alone and insecure and unworthy, even at the height of his wealth and fame. Of hitting rock bottom. And of finding God there.

"Thick like honey, sweet like grace" was Perry's own description of his experience of the God who met him in the pit of his despair.

The blog post in November was a reflection on the lack of this kind of what I called "existential urgency" in some (not all) more "progressive" Christian circles.

It was a plea not to swap out a political agenda for a spiritual one. To not forget, in all our important talk and work for social justice, that there is an irreducibly personal and affective dimension to Christian faith.

We need both. Desperately so, it would seem, given the volume of articles and studies these days outlining how sad and lonely and anxious and hopeless so many people feel, particularly the young.

Earlier this year, the *Canadian Mennonite* asked if they could publish an edited version of this post.

I'll confess that I never like being edited. I said it perfectly the first time, after all, precisely using the number of words necessary to make my point. What possible edits could be necessary?! 😊

Ah well. I agreed. I'm happy for my writing to reach a wider (or different) audience. But I suspected not all readers of the *Canadian Mennonite* would be thrilled with it.

And I was right. There was the usual range of responses, in public and in private, ranging from the very generous and supportive to the very critical and dismissive (and various points in between).

So it goes. This is what I have come to expect writing online.

At any rate, one person who emailed asked if I had heard about what was happening at Asbury University. I had not.

Evidently, a revival broke out after chapel on February 8. For two weeks straight, there was a round-the-clock presence of prayer and scripture and worship and testimony in a nondescript college chapel in a little Kentucky town called Wilmore.

You could even watch the revival via livestream (I never tuned in, but many did).

There were reports of healings, of burdens lifted, of faith rediscovered, of spiritual hunger sated. Tens of thousands of people came from all over the USA and beyond to be a part of the phenomenon, overwhelming the little two stop-light town.

And, speaking of young people, it was primarily 18-25-year-olds that filled the chapel for weeks on end. It was striking how many of these young people "narrated their

experience of the revival in terms of a supernatural liberation from depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and other mental maladies.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, this revival is the kind of thing that could be (and was) discounted quite easily.

It’s just a bunch of bible belt college kids reproducing the stories of their parents (there’s a reason this happened in Kentucky and not Canada, right?).

It’s just the well-honed craft of emotional manipulation that evangelicals have been perfecting for years.

It’s just another example of the virality of the digital age—a bunch of kids who want to be internet famous.

I understand all of these critiques. It would not be difficult, for someone so motivated, to describe this revival as a mostly human phenomenon that had little to do with God.

There was a time in my life when I might have done this. But this was not my reaction when I heard about Asbury a few weeks ago.

Instead, I could only think of the longing that it responded to.

I’m not the only one. The person who asked me about Asbury sent me a link to a post by Nadia Bolz-Weber, a popular progressive Lutheran pastor from Colorado. She, too, was paying attention to the longing:

I cannot claim to understand it, all I know is that every time I have tuned in over the past few days, it has made me a little teary. Which surprises me. I have not always been prone to mixing sentimentality and religion. Irony and religion, fine, but this Gen Xer usually recoils from anything that smacks of sap. But here I am, longing to sing in that room with 1,000 other open-hearted people...

All kinds of critiques have been directed toward what happened in Kentucky and what’s happening in its aftermath. Some may be legitimate.

But at the very least, it seemed like a cry from the heart of young people (and some older people) who want something more than what they’re experiencing.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2023/03/gratitude-and-the-asbury-revival>

Who long for acceptance and healing and forgiveness in a cultural and digital context that increasingly seems merciless, judgmental, harsh, and loveless.

This, I suppose, is what I was trying to get at with my post last year. The church must not ignore this longing.

We can't swap it out for the right politics. We can't reduce it to a need for therapy. We can't substitute the vocabulary of "mental health" wholesale for that of "spiritual hunger."

We were made by God and for God. We are hungry for grace, for mercy, for forgiveness, for love, for relationship with our Creator. I think we know, on some bone-deep level, that without these things, we are ruined.

If the church stops speaking of these things, we cease to be what God has called us to be.

(Incidentally, as you may have noticed in your bulletins, there is an online forum on Wednesday hosted by the *Canadian Mennonite* where I'll be sharing a bit more about this article. There are a few other panelists from across the country who have been asked to respond to it, and there will be a chance for questions from those tuning in. I'll clear all of this up perfectly and everyone will agree with me, and all shall be well.)

\*\*\*

Our gospel text today is the well-known story of Nicodemus. And it seems to me that Nicodemus, too, was longing for something beyond what he was presently experiencing.

He may not have been dredging the depths of addiction and despair like Matthew Perry, he may not have been a sad and lonely Gen Z-er looking for meaning and mercy in the digital wasteland, but he was searching for *something* in his nocturnal encounter with Jesus.

He begins by flattering him. *You must be from God*, he says, *for how else could you do what you are doing?*

But Jesus dodges the flattery and responds in an unexpected and provocative way. As Jesus does.

I love how Methodist pastor Jason Micheli put it in his reflections on this passage this week:

To the Pharisee's question, Jesus, in typical Jesus fashion, doesn't do anything at all to mitigate whatever spiritual crisis has led Nicodemus to Jesus. Jesus doesn't bother to comfort Nicodemus or reassure Nicodemus or do anything to relieve whatever existential tension has brought Nicodemus to Jesus...

Jesus doesn't do what most pastors are trained to do. Jesus doesn't let Nicodemus off the hook with some blessed assurance like, "It's okay. Don't worry, Nicodemus, be happy. God loves you." Jesus doesn't offer Nicodemus a non-anxious presence and say, "Your faith is fine just as it is, Nicodemus. We're all on a journey. There are many paths to my Father."

**No, Jesus sticks his thumb in whatever ache Nicodemus is nursing and raises the stakes absolutely, "If you want to see the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus, you must be born again."<sup>2</sup>**

"Jesus sticks his thumb in whatever ache Nicodemus is nursing and raises the stakes."

Jesus knows—of *course* Jesus knows—that what Nicodemus longs for is newness.

Nicodemus seems a little slow on the uptake. *What, am I supposed to re-enter the womb? How can someone be born again?*

Jesus is, of course, speaking metaphorically. He's speaking of being born again *spiritually*. He is speaking of baptism and a Spirit that blows and brings life wherever it wills.

And then, he begins to talk about his own future. He talks about the Son being "lifted up," referring both to his crucifixion and his glorification.

Finally, at the conclusion of this morning's text, he speaks the words that many of us have known since we were kids:

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://jasonmicheli.substack.com/p/jesus-whole-point-to-nicodemus>

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 the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16-17).

This is the ache that so many of us are nursing. A longing for love.

To know that we have value, that we matter, that we are not just a bit of matter occupying time and space for a handful of decades before we vanish into nothingness.

And to know that to extend this love is the reason for which we were made.

This is what Matthew Perry found at the bottom. A love that was thick like honey and sweet like grace. This is what the young adults (and older adults) that flooded into a little Kentucky town were looking for.

In some way, this is what we are all looking for. Which makes sense, because love is the point of the whole show, according to Jesus.

Love God. Love your neighbour as yourself. This sums it all up.

And do so in response to the God who so *loved the world* that he became one of us to live and to die and to rise again to save us.

\*\*\*

What ache are you nursing today? Could you, too, use a bit of newness? Could you use the Spirit to breathe life into your faith, hope, and love?

If so, I have good news. New birth is what Jesus specializes in. And it's not a task that you have to go out and accomplish. It is the gift of God.

If you think about it, birth is a fairly passive affair, isn't it? How much did you contribute to your birth? My memory of my own birth is kind of foggy, but I don't recall much of a role!

I think this is why Jesus chooses the metaphor he does. He is not saying, get busy in getting born! He is saying that new birth is the work of God in us.

The good news on this second Sunday of Lent is that we are children of a God who, to use Paul's marvelous language in one of the other readings for this morning in Romans 4, "gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not."

Including our faith. Salvation is God's work, not ours. New life is God's work, not ours.

Jesus did not come to show bad people how to be good or good people to be better, but to make spiritually dead people alive.

Yes, we are called to repent, turn around and follow. Yes, we are called to love in response to the love of God shown to us in Christ. Yes, we are even called to take up our cross and be prepared to suffer.

But all our believing and doing is a response to the finished and sufficient work of God in Christ, not an attempt to demonstrate that we're worthy of it.

Each one of us has a choice of how we respond to the ache, the longing. This was as true for Nicodemus as it is for us.

It's interesting to track Nicodemus throughout the rest of John's gospel. He appears two more times.

The first time is John 7. The context is that of division about Jesus and his identity, between the people and the Jewish religious leaders.

The Pharisees say to the temple police, "Why haven't you arrested him?" They reply, "Nobody speaks like this man!" (7:46).

The Pharisees appeal to their own authority: Have any of *us* believed in him? In other words, "has anyone *important* or *smart* or *influential* believed in this Jesus?! It's only this ignorant *crowd* who's taken by this guy!"

In this context, Nicodemus interjects: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (7:51).

The second time we meet Nicodemus comes immediately after Jesus' crucifixion in John 19. Joseph of Arimathea—a "secret disciple of Jesus" has taken the body for burial.

Here, all we read of Nicodemus is that he came with Joseph, “bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds” (John 19:39). Joseph and Nicodemus prepare and wrap the body and lay it in a tomb.

And so, Nicodemus sort of hovers around the periphery of the story of Jesus. He’s curious, but he comes in the dark to the one who is the light of the world.

He’s impressed by Jesus’ signs but baffled by his words about being born anew. *How can these things be?*

He offers half-hearted resistance to the Pharisees’ increasingly desperate attempts to have Jesus silenced, arrested, and disposed of.

And he’s there at the end—or what he *thinks* is the end—showing reverence and honour to this enigmatic and divisive figure that he could never quite figure out.

That’s the last we hear of him.

We don’t know if Nicodemus went on to become a devoted follower of Jesus or if he resumed his life as a Pharisee, a manager of God.

We don’t know if he ever gave himself to Jesus entirely, if he kept on nursing that ache or looked to the One who was lifted up on Calvary’s cross.

But in the end, Jesus makes one thing very clear for Nicodemus and for us who encounter this story all these years later.

God is love. And because of this love, God sent his Son into the world that those who believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.

Whether we have been following Jesus for long years or whether we are truly considering his words for the first time this morning, I pray that we would be a people who heed his call to come, to believe, to be born from above, and to receive the life that he offers to all.

Amen.

