

**Spring Lake Presbyterian Church**  
**Pastor: Rev. Kathryn M. Treadway**  
**February 17, 2008**

**John 3:1-17**

**3** Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He 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.” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus 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?” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> “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. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> “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. <sup>17</sup> “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.

## Let Me Live For Thee

I have been on a gut-wrenching emotional roller coaster this week. Tuesday, shortly before the session meeting began, my husband called to tell me that my sister, who was 7 months pregnant, was in the hospital. Apparently her blood pressure was elevated which meant pre-eclampsia or a high-risk pregnancy. Now, I’ve known many who had pre-eclampsia and, with bedrest, everything has turned out fine, but I was still afraid as I realized that my little sister was sick. By Wednesday morning I knew even more which frightened me even more. Her platelet count, which was supposed to be around 175,000 had dropped to 68000 overnight. I received the call – we are taking the baby now or else we will lose them both. That’s about the time many of you received phone calls and e-mails asking you to pray. As I walked into the office on Wednesday morning, my thoughts were swirling, praying that God would allow the baby to live because my sister had lost another child about 7 years ago and I couldn’t bear to see her struggle through such pain. I prayed that God would stabilize my sister whose body had turned against itself. And then, mid-morning, I received the phone call that said that my new nephew, Robbie, had been born, and that he was 3 lbs., 3 oz., and a long 15 inches. Further, my sister was stable. By yesterday he was no longer jaundiced and had discovered quite a cry for a little thing. My sister is home recovering and her son has about a month’s stay ahead of him in the hospital.

And so when I turned to this week’s scripture hearing Jesus’ words, “*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*” The images I had of my girls’ very natural births changed to a harsher, salvific birth experienced by my sister this week. Robbie, my nephew, was born quite unnaturally so that they both could be saved from death.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee (the religious teacher), was having a hard time understanding Jesus. He watched what Jesus was able to accomplish and quickly deduced that Jesus was sent from God for the only way all of the miraculous signs and wonders could occur would be with the presence of God. So Nicodemus understood the

basics – Jesus was sent by God. But Jesus spoke using parables and Nicodemus didn't always understand the words Jesus used. *"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"* Nicodemus was curious about how he could possibly see the kingdom of God that Jesus taught – he wanted to have access to the same information that allowed Jesus to heal people and cast out demons. He wanted to be sent by God too, just like Jesus was, but he couldn't figure out how to make that happen for, in Jesus' words, he had to be **born from above**. Nicodemus was convinced that Jesus was saying – you have to be born a certain way to know the kingdom as I do. But Nicodemus stated that as an adult he couldn't return to his mother and try again to be born from above, but he still wanted the knowledge that Jesus professed.

*"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'* Jesus speaks of a different kind of birth – not births by midwives or obstetricians, but birth by water, baptism, and the Spirit of God. The birth Nicodemus had referenced when he stated that he was born of his mother was flesh born of flesh, but to be born of the Spirit is another matter entirely.

Nicodemus' question is also our question much of the time, how can we be like Jesus who performed signs and wonders by the presence of God? How can we too be born of the Spirit of God? How can we be born from above? But if we look at the context of this scripture, we will find that Jesus was trying to convince everyone that it was about more than signs and wonders. The real question was: Do you want to be able to do signs and wonders or do you want to be born from above to do God's bidding, whatever it may be.

The truth of the matter is that we all want to do the great things – to perform great healings or to rescue people from evil – but to be born of the Spirit means we have to be open to whatever God may call us to. Week after week we sing Take now my life, let me live for Thee.

My context for that song changed this week as I heard about my nephew being born. The words the doctors used were, we have to "take" the baby. And the prayers that we have all been praying have spoken the words, let the baby live. And so when we sing, "take now my life, let me live for thee" I now feel the urgency for God to take our lives so that we may live, but I also hear the begging prayers, "Please, God, let me live for Thee." We pray that God will ALLOW us to live for God. When we pray that God will allow us to live for God, we're praying in such a way that we realize all we can do is be open to receive the Spirit, but it is up to God to allow us to live. To be born of the Spirit is quite an "unnatural" birth in so many ways – it is harsh in that we must open ourselves to the possibility that we can't make it on our own. We have to give up all control of our lives, to let the Great Physician, God, keep us alive. We have to open ourselves up to the elements – to the reality that we can't make it on our own.

And Jesus responded, <sup>8</sup>*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.* Jesus is saying that we can not know who the Spirit will come upon and who it will not. We have no say in the matter!!! But we can be open to the Spirit. We can pray, "please, let me live for you . . . please, allow it." We can understand our frailty as 3 lb. 3 oz. little Christians who want to thrive by being born of the Spirit. But the rest is up to God.

And so as we pray this week, "Let me live for Thee," I want each of us to pay attention to the urgency with which we pray that prayer. Are we willing to open ourselves up to being born of the Spirit? Are we willing to go wherever the Spirit leads us? Are we willing to receive the love that God has for us (John 3:16) and to open ourselves to God's leading? Again, it's a big step. The question behind Jesus' story with Nicodemus is simply or maybe not so simply, **Do you want to live?**

As Joan read for us from Genesis, Abram, at the age of 75, decided that he wanted to live. At the age of 75 Abram left all that was familiar, including the gods of his father, to follow the voice of the one God. But we

leave the story of Nicodemus not knowing if he chose to open himself to life. Jesus told Nicodemus plainly – if you want to live, things will be different – it won't be about who your parents were or what your teachers taught or even what kinds of wonders I am able to do. If you want to live, you must believe that God loved the world so much that he sent his son, the very one who is telling you about the Spirit who gives life. As we read John 3:16 we haven't even gotten to the crucifixion so we don't hear "God so loved the world that he sent his son to die. Rather, we hear God loved the world so much that he sent his son to teach us that the only way to live fully, is to be born from above. God's sending his Son was simply about God sending someone who could explain that the Spirit can allow anyone to be born from above, born in such a way that when we beg, "Please, ALLOW me to LIVE for Thee!" we are opening ourselves up to whatever God may call us to do.

On this second week of Lent, we are invited to take the next step. Last week we were encouraged to let go of the cliff and allow God to take our lives. This week we seek the desire to live for God – to allow the Spirit to blow through us, touching the rest of the world – but only as God ordains. The question is simply, or maybe not so simply, Do you want to live? If so, then may our prayer be, LET us live for Thee. (silence) Amen.