

On Being Born of Water and Spirit

3 June 2012

Hope Church

Gretchen Schoon Tanis

Did you know that this is ‘born again’ Sunday? I know the order of worship might indicate this to be Trinity Sunday in the life of the church, but I believe Jesus was quite clear to Nicodemus when he said, ‘You must be born from above’ if you are to enter the kingdom of God. For any other church or for any other pastor this might be a day to celebrate, to be excited about what worship brings to us on this day. But not this pastor. I prepared for the day with a bit of fear and trembling if I’m quite honest. Not because of the passage. It’s a privilege and an honor to be able to have a time of reflection on one of the most famous passages in all of the Bible. What makes me the most nervous about this is the Holy Spirit – and rightly so probably. You see, I’m a Reformed girl through and through. Growing up in my family, mention and celebration of the Holy Spirit was few and far between. When we would watch televangelists on TV there would be mockery and derision for the antics they were trying to pull. Experiencing the Holy Spirit would take place with a large dose of hesitation and speculation. I think I grew up formed to believe that, indeed, we were truly from the Reformed church, doing things decently and in-order. And quite frankly, the Holy Spirit moves in such a way sometimes that it has the potential to mess up our decently and in-order life. But through our passages today and my growing life experiences I wonder if we should recognize this Spirit is about transformation rather than manipulation? What happens if Jesus wants us to be born from above through water and Spirit so that we can see the revelation of who Christ is and enter into the life God has for us? Friends, do be forewarned – I do tend to embrace a charismatic understanding of the Spirit more than my upbringing might indicate, but do be reassured that I intend to reflect on these words today with a Reformed framework. Join me now in reflecting on our Gospel passage for today.

I’ll begin from the beginning, with the person of Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus in the dark of night to ask him a series of questions. Through my time of study and reflection, I grew to appreciate the person of Nicodemus. I think beforehand I used to hold a

somewhat superior mindset when it came to Nicodemus. From my viewpoint of post-crucifixion, post-resurrection perspective, I often viewed Nicodemus as sort of a thick-headed numbskull. Do you really need to ask Jesus in essence the same question three times? When Jesus tells you you need to be born from above are you really going to get stuck on the physical limitations of re-birth? Of course you can't enter your mother's womb again. Can't you see what Jesus is trying to tell you? But I grew to appreciate him more and more this time around because of his open-mindedness and his desperate attempt to try and understand. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a keeper of the Jewish law, and he understood that if he were to follow Christ with his life there would be drastic repercussions for this transformation of belief. But he exemplified a man on a mission - a search for Christ that led him to Jesus in the dark of night to ask him these questions. And, if we are to take Nicodemus' story in its entirety, we see later on that his life was transformed as he anointed Jesus' body with oils after his death on the cross. As we see through the person of Nicodemus and from our own understanding of life as well, re-birth in Christ takes time. As opposed to my opinion of being born again in the Spirit from childhood, being born from above takes time. Being born from above is a two-fold process of water and Spirit.

I believe the first step of our transformation takes place through the waters of baptism. Jesus stated that no one will enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. This baptismal water is a place where we die to self and rise with Christ. This is a place where we are invited to put to death our doubt, our skepticism, where our hearts are changed from ones of stone to hearts of flesh. These waters are not of condemnation or emotional manipulation but of reformation – we are re-formed in the life of Christ. Our old selves are put to death and we rise again in the new life of Jesus. I imagine this maternal Spirit and water working together like the life-giving amniotic fluid of birth. Without that watery substance that brings life to and sustains infants in the womb, development would be impossible. Without the oxygen and nourishment that fluid brings to a child, life would be impossible. I imagine this water of life offered by Christ to be tactile. What forms of water do you need today? Cold, refreshing water to quench your thirst? The smooth, peaceful, glass-like surface of calm waters? What about the

adrenaline-pumping adventurous white-water rapids of the river of life? I recognize the water of redemption is not always an easy process or experience for some. It can feel like flood waters threatening to destroy what you have and who you are. These waters of transformation can look like the journey of Andy DuFrane, the main character from one of my favorite movies, *The Shawshank Redemption*: in order to escape from the prison where he was wrongfully held, he crawled through the sewer system, through the muck and foul smell of the waste of others. After such a long journey, he emerged out of the sewer pipe into the refreshing waters of a river outside of the prison walls. It is one of the best images of baptism I have ever seen. Perhaps in your journey back to Christ you have had to travel through miles of waste. And I wonder, is this water of life that Jesus implores us to be born into like a cool swimming pool on a hot day? Are most of us standing on the edge of the water looking in at the pool but refusing to jump in? Have we stopped short of the cleansing waters of baptism that promise to wash us and make us clean once more?

Second, I believe our transformation takes place through the Spirit of Christ.

This Spirit that Christ is teaching Nicodemus about – the Spirit from above – is a Spirit of adoption. In Romans 8 we hear today that the Spirit we have received is not one of slavery but one of adoption where we are given the voice to cry “Abba! Father!” It is that same Spirit that bears witness to where we belong, in the embrace of God, found in the life of Christ. With this in mind, allow me to share a story with you from my extended family.

My brother and sister-in-law went through the process of adopting a baby girl from China. Most of you understand the very long and arduous journey adoption can be. Application for adoption, home visits, interviews from social workers, raising funds, prayer that it all comes together perfectly, dealing with bureaucracies of foreign countries, travel, and the seemingly never-ending time of waiting for it to come to fruition. Finally the time came for JR and Michele to travel to China to adopt my niece just after her first birthday. They journeyed with 13 other families from across the United States and spent a good portion of two weeks in enforced sight-seeing time around China

before the day came to meet my niece for the first time. Finally the day came for adoption! All thirteen families were ushered into a large banquet room of a hotel and caregivers from the orphanage were there with thirteen Chinese girls who were to be adopted by these families. My brother and sister in law did their best to scan the room to look for their new daughter they had only seen in a small picture attached to the adoption papers. One by one the other families were called on to meet their adoptive child. Finally, after waiting so long and journeying so far, their names were called. As soon as they stepped towards my niece, Ellie leaned over into the arms and the embrace of my sister-in-law and clung tightly to her and did not let go. People of God, this Spirit is one of adoption, a place where we can lean in to the embrace of God and find a place to cling to and to call home. My sister-in-law often says that there are no words to describe how it felt knowing in that instant of embrace it was meant to be. Ellie was ordained to be a part of our family. For those of you who need to be reminded today, you are welcomed into God's family by the embrace of adoption. And I think of David (Klooster) and Elsie (Lamb) today – baptized children of God welcomed into the eternal embrace of God – the embrace of the eternal life in the kingdom.

And as adopted children of God we are given a voice, one to cry out Abba, Father. It is like Jesus, son of God, when he is in the garden of Gethsemane, when he cries out Abba, Father! This maternal Spirit gives us a voice even in the darkest hour to cry out to God. This Mother Spirit who enables us to say as Jesus said, "Not my will, but yours be done." This is a life-giving Spirit, a Spirit that re-orient us back to the embrace of God. Born from above, re-born into the life of God. And this image of Jesus kneeling in the garden reminds me of the image of the first humans in the Garden of Eden with their creator – near to and in relationship with God without fear *or self-consciousness*. The book of Romans reminds us that it is not a spirit of slavery that we receive but a Spirit of being children of God. And I think about what parents and children do together – God reminds us today that our relationship can be one of play, creativity and working side by side.

Come with me on a journey if you would. Like people entering into the pensieve of memories in the Harry Potter stories, let us dive into my life as an eighteen year old

living in Melbourne, Australia. I had taken a year off between high school and college to participate with Youth With A Mission. For three months I took classes with around thirty other students on the Christian faith, then followed that with three months of mission work in Africa. It was coming towards the end of the classwork stage and a local pastor had agreed to come to our class for evening teachings one week and at the end of our classroom time he would pray for classmates as individuals in intercession. On the Thursday night of that week he asked if he might be able to pray for our class as a whole and invited us all to stay later than usual once class was finished. As he introduced the prayer time that evening he stated that he would like to lay hands on students if it was permitted while he was praying. One by one my classmates stood up to be prayed for. As this pastor prayed and laid hands my classmates started falling over! This was NOT anything this naïve, Reformed, Mid-western girl had seen before.

Watching my classmates fall over during a time of prayer and laying on of hands was quite disturbing to me actually. I was shocked at first. Then confused. Weren't these my friends? Couldn't I trust them? What are they doing fall over like that? I was certain that the pastor had planned this and had asked for some dupes to volunteer first to be pushed over. But how could that be when I was certain my classmates would not try to pull a fast one over on me. I sat at the back of the room completely dumbfounded. And then I became angry. Actually, I became very angry. I was indignant that my school was trying to pull a fast one on me and I was having none of it. I stormed out of the classroom and out of the building and started walking the neighborhood that night twisting and turning with the sights and sounds that I had witnessed over and over in my mind. I was internally shouting my questions at God – what is happening here? What is going on? And then God spoke – **don't you believe my Spirit can move in powerful ways?** People of God, Jesus tells us that in order to enter the kingdom of God we must be born of water and of Spirit. Is this Spirit about manipulation or about transformation?

Hope Church, in this our 150th year, I wonder if we have grown to be like Nicodemus from our gospel passage today? He was a Pharisee, a keeper of the law, and was part of the religious aristocracy. He had questions for Jesus, but in order to save face, went to

Jesus in the dark of night. Do we find ourselves in the darkness of spiritual separation from God? Are we so focused on doing things decently and in-order that we lose sight of the life giving Spirit Jesus has given us? Are we so confused by how being re-born is physically possible that we miss the promise of God to transform our hearts from ones of stone to ones of flesh – ones that are warm and sensitive, responsive to the touch of God? Friends in Christ, be transformed! Swim in the waters of your baptism, live in the Spirit of your adoption. AMEN!