

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**May 31, 2015**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Clarksburg, WV**

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**John 3:1-17**

*Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (John 3:3 N.R.S.V.)*

## Of Wind and Grace

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

I saw a cartoon once of a pastor sitting at his desk. On his desk the offering plates are full and overflowing. The pastor is frantically looking through his sermon notes. "What did I say? What did I say?"

There is something very humbling about preaching. Because so much of what we hope will happen in a sermon - that people experience a genuine encounter with God, one that will shape and transform their lives and living - is in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

I know there have been times when I am in the middle of a sermon that I have worked hard on. I have researched and studied, I have crafted just the right mix of funny stories and serious challenge. I am proud of how clever and creative I have been. I look up and everyone's eyes have glazed over.

I ask myself, why did I want to preach this sermon? What did I have in mind? Some sermons just don't make it. They collapse, fall to the floor, and slink off into the corner to die.

Other times I have preached sermons that refused to come together. I have wrestled with them until I simply ran out of time, and so I got up and preached what I had. There have been times when the sermon felt like such a flop that I couldn't wait for the benediction. I have stood at the back telling myself, "Nobody bats a thousand, not even Tiger Woods wins every time."

Then Bruce comes by shakes my hand and says, "That was just what I needed." I realize there is a tear in his eye. He says, "So, uh . . . thanks John."

Then Dolores comes out and she says, "John, you know I have surgery next week and I was just dreading it, but after what you said this morning, I'm not afraid any more."

I have even had people come up to me weeks after a sermon and say, “You know that sermon you preached right after my mother died? You said such and such. That was exactly what I needed to hear.” Here is the real kicker, I am very sure that I never said “such and such.” It is the work of the Holy Spirit, I know. God let them hear what they needed to hear. So all I can say is, “Praise God!”

As Wil Willimon once said in reference to preaching, “It’s tough to invest yourself in an activity that you don’t understand, you can’t predict, and you can’t control.” (Pulpit Resources, May 31, 2015 pg. 38)

I have some sympathy then for old Nicodemus. As the gospel of John tells it, Nicodemus was a pharisee, a church teacher. He was supposed to be the one who led others to understanding. Yet here he is before Jesus, sounding like the densest kind of fool.

Nicodemus says, Jesus, you got a good thing going here. That was a pretty good trick turning water into wine (in violation of the church rules about alcohol in the fellowship hall, I must say). Still that and all the healing, very impressive stuff. I wonder if you could just give me a crash course on the kingdom? What are the steps and in what order?

Jesus says, “You have to be born from above to see the kingdom. You have to get the Holy Spirit. And the wind blows where it wills.”

And Nicodemus said, “Say what?” Come on, Jesus, you are talking nonsense. How is a person supposed to be born again? Can a person crawl back into his mother’s womb when he is old?

It is interesting. The Greek word here is “anothen.” You must be born “anothen.” The Greek word can mean “again” or “starting from scratch” or “from above.” While there are elements of all three meanings here, the N.R.S.V. correctly translates anothen in this context as “from above.” Salvation is not something we do. It is something we receive. It is done “from above, ” top to bottom.

It is interesting to me that we often choose to talk about salvation with the same kind of misunderstanding that Nicodemus had. We talk about salvation as “being born again,” rather than from above. Maybe because being born again sounds like something we might have more control over than being born from above. Still, the metaphor holds.

I can imagine Jesus saying to Nicodemus, “So how were you born the first time Nicodemus? What part did you play?” Nicodemus says, “Well, let me think about that, I squeezed my eyes tight shut, did a half somersault, extended my hands and pushed off with my feet.” Jesus just sits there looking at him patiently.

Nicodemus says, “Okay, I get it, I didn’t have to do anything to be born.” Jesus nods and says, “So it is with being born of the Spirit.”

Poor Nicodemus shakes his head. “Okay, so how? How does one get the Holy Spirit? How does one achieve salvation? What are the steps? Is there book on it? An app that I can download to my phone? Are there illustrations?”

Isn't it interesting that when Jesus is talking about our salvation, he uses two of the most mysterious and uncontrollable things in life? He uses birth and wind. Jesus says, “You must be born from above.” Then he says, “The wind blows where it will.”

This is so tough for us down-to-earth, pragmatic, over-achievers. This is so important. We want to be in control. How do we earn our way into heaven? What are the necessary steps?

Jesus says, “For God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have life everlasting.”

Salvation is not something we earn, or something we do. It is gift. It is grace. All that is necessary is to accept - believe. We don't control our own birth nor do we control the wind, yet we benefit from both.

Imagine that you got a call one day and the caller said “Congratulations, you had won the multimillion dollar jackpot.”

You say, “But how can this be, I never even bought a ticket.”

The caller says, “Someone purchased one for you.”

You say, “Okay, so what is the catch? What do I have to do in order to get these winnings?”

The caller says, “You just have to agree to receive them. We'll even bring them by your house and carry them in and deposit them in the middle of your living room.”

“But what do I have to do?”

“Say yes, open the door.”

Salvation is like that. It seems too good to be true. But it is true. It is wonderfully true! You must be born from above. Open the door and let Christ in. Open the door, that the Spirit may blow through your life.

Amen.

