

REPAIR, REPLACE or REBIRTH  
[written in oral form]

John 3:1-17  
Lent 2, Year A

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I once told a new immigrant, "There are three things that you need to know about. The three things are: duct tape, WD40 and bailing wire."  
I pointed out that if something is stuck, then use WD 40. If something is loose or broken, then duct tape or bailing wire will fix it.  
I said that almost anything can be repaired with those three things.

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I wish life was so simple.....

Moreover, the sad reality is that fewer and fewer things can be easily repaired. I had box full of spare parts, which includes items from coffee makers, and even motors from old cassette players. When something broke, I'd try to fix it or keep the working parts for future use. Some of those old fragments were more than 30 years old.

They were not included in the move here..... because most household "stuff", these days, are not made to be repaired.  
Filling garbage dumps and buying new gadgets are such a waste, and a toll on the environment.

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Some things can be restored or made to work,...for a while.  
In 1976, I bought two orange weave lawn chairs. Remember those collapsing aluminum frame chairs? Over the years, I would use wire and duct tape to fix the worn out plastic weaving. They were unsightly, but the repairs kind... of kept the chairs working.  
Sometimes,..... an item just can't be ... or isn't worth fixing.  
Sometimes broken means really broken, and an alternative is needed.  
This condition can happen in the non-tangible realm, too.

There may come a time when our theology or our world view no longer works, and there just isn't enough WD40, duct tape or bailing wire to keep it going.  
Pretending all is well... is only possible for a while,... and "pretending" is a huge and heavy burden to bear—a burden that tends to make people more rigid and defensive.

Replacing a coffee maker is one thing. Altering our very being and perception is quite another.

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We all endure external and internal expectations.  
We have our own fears and stressors that can wear down our facade.  
Like a patio chair exposed to the elements,....things break down.

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I imagine Nicodemus was wondering what was wrong with his life—why his formula / his answers were not working. I bet that he knew something was wrong. He felt it. He felt the need for change.  
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At the time, many thought Jesus was simply another, the latest, itinerant teacher to be in vogue – the next *sensation* who was going around making bold promises.

Yet something was different with Jesus. Amazing things were truly happening. Healing was happening and lives were changed, .. and people were taking notice, including people in high places.

Nicodemus was part of the ruling elite; he sat on the Sanhedrin, the authorized judicial body. He was a man of position and success in life; he was an esteemed religious leader.

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No doubt, most of the Pharisees were curious about Jesus, and often talked about him. Jesus was creating a stir.

Nicodemus was aware of Jesus' fame and reception by the masses, and it likely prompted some concern,... and it pricked at his curiosity.

In addition, it's apparent that Nicodemus was searching, too.

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In the cover of darkness, Nicodemus decided to search out Jesus, to discover more about him and his message. This was a personal quest.

Bold inquisitions are done for all to see.

Doubt and confession are usually admitted discreetly.

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Nic approached Jesus, and addressed him in a proper and formal manner, but added the very personal observation, saying, "Only someone who has God's spirit could do the things you do."

Before he could submit his question, Jesus answered it.

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This is noteworthy.

Sometimes our spoken question does not petition the answer we are actually searching for.

Last Fall, we asked the young adults what they thought about church and how to make church more appealing to them.

I don't think we asked the right questions.

Better questions are: what is it that you need overall, and what is God' asking you to do?

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To avoid confusion, Jesus answered the real question throbbing in Nic's soul.

Jesus answered, "YES, YES, No one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew."

*The Greek word implies both born anew and born from above, suggesting that this is some sort of amazing metaphysical phenomena.*

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Jesus' declaration hit Nicodemus square between the ears – it touched his deepest anxiety.

Without thinking Nic responded, "How can anyone be born after grown old?" In other words, I am mature and up in years, how can **I be the change** and become new?

He quickly recovered, and tried to mask his emotional self revelation with the practical question, "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

But his first question of “How can I find newness and how can I have a renaissance at my age”, still lingered in the air.

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Again Jesus began his declaration with the profound YES, YES, known as AMEN, amen... which can also be translated, verily, verily.. or very truly.

*We normally use Amen as an exclamation statement at the end of a sentence, and that is why it is not translated Amen, Amen.*

The declaration “Amen” is like putting the message in bold font and with an underline.

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And, Jesus said to Nic, Amen, Amen, of course you are born of the flesh, but to experience kingdom living / God’s domain here, now and always, you must be born spiritually. Don’t be astonished by this, it is really rather basic,... and note, just as you didn’t control your physical birth, **you do NOT have control** over the spiritual birth, either.

It is not a matter of more duct tape and bailing wire, nor is it a self re-creation based on new insight or logical deduction.

**The** rebirth is **not** our doing.

Living God’s way is **more than** an intellectual discipline.

*The wind blows where it chooses, you hear it and feel it, but you can’t control it, nor do you know where it came from.*

*And, so it is with being born of the Spirit.*

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Nicodemus stammered in reply, “How can these things be?”

Jesus, answered, “Are you an esteemed leader, and yet you do not understand?”

That is a nice way of saying, “I don’t think you’re as ignorant as your question implies.”

Nicodemus’ struggle revealed that he understood more than was comfortable to admit.

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And keep in mind, Nic was a very religious person.

We tend to have the misperception that being born again only applies to the “heathen” or to those who are not religious or church people.

The exchange with Nicodemus shows us otherwise.

We may be astonished to learn that this message is for us.

We church people generally think the Nicodemus dialogue is for someone else, and that **we present** John 3:16 for others to see.

But, this message is for you and me!

We are invited to share the foot prints of Nicodemus, and we are invited to see our darkness / our brokenness... and the light before us and to respond to being born anew.

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When a baby is naturally born it is because the time is full and it is the time to be born. No one can exactly predict when birthing will begin or how long the process will last. It may be brief or it may take a very long time. (Just ask Shirley about her waiting).

And, for the baby,... being born likely feels like dying. The baby is leaving a warm, moist, cozy safe environment, ...granted an increasingly cramped and confining world, but it's the only home the baby has ever known. And, the process can be scary, and it usually brings tears, tears of surrender—surrendering to the arms of a yet known,..... loving parent(s).

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For us who have lived in this world for a while:

being born “from above” seems like dying.

And, the timing is like the wind – it is beyond our reach.

It may be a quick new birth..... or it may take a long, long time.

Either way, the full realization of the birth brings tears because it is scary; it is new; it is beyond our control, and it is like dying, dying to the old and familiar,.....albeit broken... world that once seemed comfortable.

Being born anew ...requires surrender – surrender to the yet.... fully realized love and grace of God. – surrender to unfolding “new” living in God’s domain.

And, notice both births come out of darkness.

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Nicodemus was in the darkness and was drawn to the light – to Jesus. Yet, the presence of the light / affirming or admiring the light **does not** bring new birth. There is more to it than that.

Fully encountering Jesus opens our eyes to a new way of thinking / of perceiving the world. Yet, it is God’s Spirit of love and grace that enables us /empowers us to not only believe, but to also live the new way / God’s way.

This is a spiritual transformation/ rebirth!

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Based on Jesus' additional comments, we can assume that Nicodemus left holding onto his old taped and patched theology and world view.

Maybe he went home and tried to ease the friction with lubrication / with libations. ???

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That may sound silly, but I've talked to many people who have **adamantly** defended a frozen solid theology that is held together with spare parts and isolated passages. And, they aggressively assert that their belief system is working, but their soul cries otherwise.

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It's not easy to give up on a life system we know so well.

It's not easy to admit pain and confess brokenness.

Walter Brueggeman said, "As long as we deny our pain, we lose the danger of the Gospel--the part where we give up control and allow God's mystery to unfold in our lives."

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There comes a time, when something just can't be repaired.

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At the beginning of every summer I'd tell Leslie, “I think those two old orange lawn chairs just needs some more wire and tape.”

She'd counter that we never use them because they keep falling apart, and to that I firmly responded, "I can fix them."

Well, ...a year or so before we moved here, I painfully realized that those chairs would no longer reliably hold anyone. They were beyond repair. They were broken.

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Our lives, our understanding of life, of God, of creation of relationships are far more complicated than a lawn chair,..... yet.... too often we know our system is broken / we sense that our beliefs are not working.... and either we try to repair the old.... or in some cases... replace it.  
Or, worse.....we keep putting our faith in our minds' rationale / in our broken belief system.

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Sadly, a lot of people have discovered that the religion handed to them was broken, and so they simply threw it away, without replacement. They have given up on religion,...and giving up on God.

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That is exactly what happened to a good seminary friend of mine. Not long ago, he quit pastoring and declared he was an atheist.

He once defended the Baptist mantra, "Once saved always saved."

I wonder how that is working for him now?  
Moreover, I don't think salvation is spliced together with absolute axioms, at least..... that is not how the wind blows.

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Right now, my friend is experiencing a sense of relief because pretending that something is working when it is really broken is very taxing and depressing. In fact, trying to use... over and over again, something that is broken,... can make a person mean.

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I told my friend that you may not realize it yet, but you're closer to being born anew than you've been for a long, long time.

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When we admit / confess that our belief system / our futile attempts of controlling life is broken,.... then we can breathe in deeply God's Spirit.

We **can not** construct righteous living. We can Not make ourselves live God's way, nor can we repair our broken lives. Putting together a great systematic theology is like painting a picture of a car. It may look nice, but it won't carry passengers.

We can not do grace without grace, and we can't love without love. Moreover, we can not start again. We are physically born only once.

The only workable alternative,.... is what Jesus presented to Nicodemus: which is receiving God's Spirit that delivers us to a new domain / a new birth / a new way of being.  
We must breathe in / take in God's loving Spirit, and breathing is not a one time endeavour.

We must let go /repent what is broken—breathing out,... and breath in God’s Spirit....., .... and so on it goes.

This is as radical as a baby being born.

Rebirth is much like falling blindly backwards into "For God so loved the world...."...for God so loved you and me.

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With rebirth, each day is new, as is our growth and potential in God’s way / God’s love.

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Like the wind, God's Spirit is all around.

Look for God.....and feel God's Spirit moving.

Exhale and Breathe deeply.....breathe deeply.

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A closing observation:

babies don't all look alike when they are born, and that's okay.

I don't think we all look alike when we are reborn either, and that's okay, too.

Rebirth.....will allow your true self to soar in the wind!