



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

March 12, 2017

# **Born Again**

Rev. Jason Freyer

# **Born Again**

Rev. Jason Freyer

© 2017 by Rev. Jason Freyer and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: March 17, 2017

We've started a bit of a new tradition in our family. Each Monday, Sarah heads to the library to work, so the boys and I have the whole day together. I've started calling it "Manday." I try my best to make sure that each and every Manday, we have some kind of outing just to keep us busy. With the winter weather being what it is, we frequently just make our way to the South Hills Village to walk laps around inside.

Inevitably, during these walks around the mall, at least 3 or 4 people will come up to me and say "Woah, dad. You've got your hands full!" This statement bothers me for two reasons. One, it assumes that fatherhood can be reduced to the incredible amount of work that my kids require. And secondly, I'm annoyed by how incredibly correct they are!

For instance, my relationship with sleep has changed greatly! When the boys were born, they refused to sleep in their cribs. So Sarah and I developed a little system wherein we would lay the boys in their bouncer chairs, and move the bouncer chairs right to edge of the couch. Then Sarah and I would take turns sleeping on the couch, waking up in the middle of the night to offer bottles and change diapers. I was even getting pretty good at feeding infants in my sleep. But I was also in seminary. And, I was working. So, I was super tired.

Now that the boys are starting to walk, things are even more challenging. There appears to be some sort of law of physics that states that twins will never move in the same direction at the same time. What used to be a reasonably comfortable living room has now transformed into a zone of death and destruction and pain. My primary objective most days is to clear the floor, to get as many of the tripping hazards out of the way as possible. To help with this, God has given me

some sort of ninja superhero like ability to catch a falling toddler from across the room in the blink of an eye. But I'm not always on top of my game. Sometimes they fall and bonk their heads.

This leads me to attempt to comfort them. A few weeks ago the boys had ear infections at the same time, which is just a whole lot of fun for the whole family. While both boys are working on their words, Josh has managed to master communicating his emotions with his facial expressions. So as we would be up all night, Josh would just look up at me with this face that asked "What's going on, Dad? Why does it feel like this? When will it stop?" If you are a parent, you know how difficult, painful, and horrible it can feel to not be able to answer these questions for your child.

As I spend more time learning how to be a father, I'm learning a lot more about my relationship with God as my father.

Take Nicodemus for example. In our Gospel lesson today, he's having a long night just like Josh. What we know about Nicodemus is that he is a Pharisee. Now usually we make these the bad guys in the story of Jesus, but that's an over stating it a bit. The Pharisees were a group of Israelites who believed that if they could convince the nation of Israel to follow the law completely, then God would bless them and allow them to take back their nation from the Romans. So they are sticklers about the rules, but not just for the sake of the rules. These are folks who are trying to live out their faith in God by what they do. We also read that Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews, which is a bit ambiguous, but almost certainly means that he had some sort of clout within the community. He also had a bit of a reputation to uphold. For

both of these reasons, and maybe a few more, following Jesus could be potentially dangerous for Nicodemus.

And yet, Nicodemus has probably seen some stuff. He tells the reason of his visit as the signs that Jesus has performed. I suppose it's possible that he's just heard about them, but my guess is that rumors and stories don't push a man to action like this. My guess is that Nicodemus was there for something. Maybe he saw Jesus restore sight to a blind man. Maybe he saw someone who is lame get up and walk around. Or maybe he tasted some really good wine that he was certain was just water a few seconds ago. Whatever it was, some kind of experience with Jesus has pushed Nicodemus to curiosity.

But he's cautious. So he shows up at night. In fact, it's how he gets labeled. For the rest of John's gospel, any time Nicodemus comes up John reminds us that he's the one who showed up at night.

So if Jesus can do all these wonderful things, and say all these brilliant teachings, I wonder what Nicodemus was looking to hear from him? I'll bet it wasn't "You need to be born again!"

This is the passage from which we get the image of born again Christians, but in fact this isn't exactly what Jesus says. The word Jesus uses in the original Greek is confusing, as is just about every Greek word. It can literally mean "born again," but it can also mean to be born anew, to get a fresh start, to start over. It can also mean to be "born from above." Nicodemus thinks that Jesus means born again, and gets hilariously confused about the biology behind such an interpretation. So Jesus clarifies, and makes certain we understand that he means born from above. He

frames the conversation around being born of the flesh, our natural instincts, our human inclinations, or being born of the Spirit, which according to Jesus is a wild and uncontrollable movement.

When Jesus does this, he sets before us a choice. We essentially have dual citizenship. We are of course born of the flesh. We take up physical existence. But through Christ, we are also born of the Spirit. So the question Jesus is essentially asking Nicodemus is, which birthright are you going to claim?

I've had the honor to spend some time recently with some folks who are on both sides of the experience of adoption. Those who are interested in adopting a young person have a language and vocabulary of love that is astoundingly beautiful. They recognize that this young person has been born into a situation that is less than ideal, and they want to help. They want to give them a family, and an identity. And I've also spent some time with folks who have themselves been adopted, who likewise have an incredible vocabulary of love. They have a family they were born into, and recognize that they came from a rough situation. But they also have a family that claimed them, and they choose to claim this new family back. They've claimed for themselves a new birthright.

Jesus makes it clear that we can in fact claim the birthright of the flesh. We can claim that by insisting that this life is all there is, or by doing everything you can to solve your own problems, or by worrying about what the world around you thinks of you, or showing up at night so no one will see you. You can claim the birthright of the flesh by leaning on the strength of your own finances, or by turning the pleasures of life that God blesses us with into addictions, or by labeling others, and then demonizing the labels. Jesus makes it clear

again and again in the scripture that this is a choice being set before us. It's like a son, who asks his father for his share of the inheritance before dad has died, and then hits the road to blow it all on fine clothes and cheap women. It would be like a servant who has been forgiven a debt of about a hundred years wages, who then turns around and refuses to forgive a fellow servant who owes him \$20. It would be like a rich young ruler, who when encouraged to sell everything he has to follow Jesus, simply walks away sad. Jesus is always putting this choice in front of us, largely because this choice is always *going* to be in front of us. This is an everyday kind of battle.

There are some who would make this discussion around being “born again” about what you do. They might want to make it about who's in and who's out. But the trick is, being born is not something you do, it's something that happens to you.

You cannot, no matter how hard you try, redeem yourself. You cannot, no matter how hard you try, repair the broken relationships between humanity and God. You cannot, no matter how hard you try, push back the fall and fix the broken world. You cannot, because it's all already been done in the person of Jesus. In and through Christ, you are a redeemed person, body and soul. In and through Christ, you share in the relationship with God that he called very good from the beginning of creation. In and through Christ, you can participate in the building of the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus makes clear at the end of this passage that this is not a marker of who's in and who's out. For God so loved the world, that he sent his one and only son, that *everyone* who believes in him would have eternal life. And then just for



good measure, he tags on that this is not a conversation of condemnation. That's not what the Son of Man is all about. This is not a matter of who's in and who's out. It's a matter of making sure you choose the right birthright.

You can choose the birthright of the Spirit by insisting that generosity is a better way to live than greed. You can claim it by being a peacemaker in your community. You can claim this one by praying, even and especially for those who wrong you. You can claim this one by seeking to offer the same forgiveness to others that Christ has offered to you. You can claim this one by choosing joy, even in life's more disturbing and disruptive seasons.

You see, when we are born, we are part of a family. And we can choose to run away from that family, that's for sure. But we can also choose to live into that family. When we celebrate baptism, we remember that God has already laid claim to us. According to Romans 8:15, we are given a Spirit of adoption, wherein we can claim God back.

We can claim as Father the God who doesn't get tired when he stays up all night with you, who will neither slumber nor sleep. We can claim as Father the God who won't let your foot slip, no matter how many toys get in the way as you learn to walk. We can claim as Father the God who whispers words of comfort when life stops making sense. We can claim as Father the God who never, EVER, has his hands full.

I'm no scientist, which should come as a comfort to many. But as I understand eternity, it is indeed a time that will have no end. You and I will enjoy the company of each other in the redemption of God for eons to come after we pass. But it's also true that eternity has no beginning, meaning you and

I have access to this birthright of the Spirit right now, in this moment, in this space. Will you live into it? Will you live by the Spirit, and not by the flesh? Will you live each day choosing the birthright that is already yours? Will you live each day claiming as Father the one who loves us, who will not let our foot slip, who never has his hands full? You can, because it's already yours.

For God so loved YOU, that he sent his only Son, that you might have eternal life.

Thanks be to God!



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630

**[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)**