SERMON:

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, came to see Jesus by night. Preachers have often noted that Nicodemus came by night - under the cover of darkness - keeping his visit a secret - lacking the courage of his convictions.

But I admire Nicodemus. A Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, Nicodemus was as "establishment" as you can get.

Jesus, on the other hand, was a young upstart preacher.

He had just created a disturbance in the temple - a terrible violence! Today we call it the cleansing of the temple.

I’m sure that Nicodemus' friends called it something else.

People like Nicodemus usually avoided people like Jesus, but Nicodemus sought him out.

Later, Nicodemus crossed paths with Jesus on two different occasions, and did what he could to help Jesus.

* Firstly, religious leaders were plotting to arrest Jesus, but Nicodemus defended him.
* Then, after Jesus' crucifixion, Nicodemus helped to prepare Jesus' body for burial. He provided a hundred pounds of burial ointments - a veritable fortune.

But this first time, Nicodemus came to see Jesus by night. He spoke to Jesus. His tone was respectful. He called Jesus a teacher and said that it was obvious that Jesus had come from God.

Jesus responded by saying,

**"Most certainly, I tell you, unless one is born anew,**

**he can't see the Kingdom of God."**

**"Born anew.?" -**  The New Testament was written in Greek, and anything we read in the English language is a scholar's attempt to help us understand what the Greek words meant.

The Greek word that is translated "born anew" is “**ANOTHEN**!. It can also be translated **"born again,"** and many Bibles translate it that way.

It can also be translated **"born from above."** All three are valid translations.

For me, understanding this enriches the story. Jesus is telling us that we must be **born anew - born again** - and **born from above**.

All three of those translations point to God and God's action in our lives.

* I can't be born **anew** on my own.
* I can't be born **again** on my own.
* I can't be born **from above** on my own.

Only God has the power to remake me - to change me from a sinful person to a holy person - to give me a new life.

But "born anew" confused Nicodemus. He responded,

**"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?"**

Was Nicodemus trying to dodge Jesus' emphasis on a spiritual rebirth - or was he really unable to think beyond the idea of a physical birth. We don't know.

Then Jesus gave another surprising response. He talked about the wind. Let’s introduce another Greek word - **PNEUMA**. *Pneuma* means wind, but it also means spirit. Jesus said:

**"The *pneuma* (the wind) blows where it wants to,**

**and you hear its sound,**

**but don't know where it comes from and where it is going.**

**So is everyone who is born of the *Pneuma* (the Spirit)..**

The wind blows. We can feel it and see its effects, but we don't know where it comes from or where it goes. It's like electricity. We know it is there and we respect its power, but we don't understand it. Jesus said**,**

**"So is everyone who is born of the Spirit".**

Jesus was saying, "You might not understand how the Spirit works to change people's lives, Nicodemus, but you cannot deny that it happens.

Just as you have felt the wind on your face, so you have also seen men and women whose lives have been changed by the Spirit of God."

And so have we! We have met people who are full of God's love and gentleness and kindness. There are people like that here today. Sometimes they are tough people whom Christ has made gentle.

I once read about a man like that. He was a tough-guy – school rugby player. He loved to hit opposing players - to hit them hard and take them out.

He was a tough-guy off the field too - drinking a lot - getting into fights - heading for trouble.

But the local Club offered to pay him to join a big Fellowship of Christian Athletes get-together.

He thought it would be fun.

They had professional coaching. They also talked about Jesus and the Christian faith.

 He enjoyed the professional coaching. He skipped the part about Jesus and the Christian faith. He would go back to his room, where he could drink.

After he returned home, The local school asked him to tell the parents of his experience.

He didn't want to tell them about skipping the parts about Jesus, so he got some of the material that had been given him and began to read.

**It made sense to him.**  Things began to come into focus. He went to a pastor for more help and, eventually, became a Christian. He studied for the ministry and has been a minister for decades. They call him Gentle Ben.

A long time ago I met someone else like that.

 I met him in a prison. I was in the waiting room, waiting to visit a prisoner, and I also noticed a middle-aged man.

He had a strong face and wore a leather jacket.

He obviously had travelled many a hard mile.

He looked tough. But something in his manner spoke of gentleness. Something in his manner drew me to him even though he was just standing there, not saying a word.

It was a kind of strength - a kind of quiet strength.

I learned that he was a Christian, layman from a nearby church. He was visiting a prisoner as an act of ministry.

He was a person whose life Christ had touched. I was fascinated to realize that I could see the special quality of his life before I ever met him - before he ever opened his mouth.

Jesus said, **"...unless one is born anew (or born again - or born from above), he can't see the Kingdom of God."**

No one can see the kingdom of God without being re-created by the hand of God. **No one can see the kingdom of God until they submit themselves to God's sculpting hand.**

 Some of us have a problem with the phrase, "born again." First of all, "born again" has been co-opted by Christians who seem to want to force all Christians into the same mould. They can be irritating.

Herbert Caen, the columnist, says,

**"The trouble with born-again Christians is that they are an even bigger pain the second time around."**

 Is there such a thing as a Christian who hasn't been born again. There must **not** be if Jesus said, **"...unless one is born ANEW (or born AGAIN - or born FROM ABOVE), he can't see the Kingdom of God".**

 There's another problem with this "born again" idea!

Some of us were raised in Christian homes and came by our faith gradually. We can't point to a dramatic conversion experience. We weren't drunks and carousers. We didn't get saved from booze and conniving at a revival meeting.

**But that's all right!** Our Christian birth experience could be gentler because Christ has had more time to shape our lives. When Jesus comes into our lives earlier, he can use sandpaper instead of a sledgehammer to re-make us into Godly people.

That reminds me of a road sign on an unmade road in the wilderness of Alaska. **The sign says, "Choose your rut carefully, because you will be in it for the next twenty-five miles."**

The people who believe that “**you can't teach an old dog new tricks”** believe that we will be in the same rut for the rest of our lives. **How terrible!**

But Jesus doesn't agree. When Jesus says,

**"...unless one is born ANEW,**

**(or born AGAIN - or born FROM ABOVE),**

**he can't see the Kingdom of God."**

He is saying that we CAN change - that there IS hope. The power for that hope comes from above. The power for that hope comes from God.

We cannot change ourselves, but **God's Holy Spirit** can change **us**.

God can do great things for us if we will let him.

God created us in his image in the beginning, but we defaced that image by our sin. Now God offers to re-create us once again in the fullness of our original Godly beauty.

 Jesus said:

**God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

**17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world,**

**through him.**

All it takes is this:

* We must **want** God to make that change in our lives.
* We must be **willing** to "let go and let God."
* We must be **willing** to become what God wants rather than what we want.

So, let’s pray for God to re-create us again in his beautiful image.

Let’s pray for God to make us **new people**.

Then let’s stand back - and see what God can do.