

Born of the Spirit
First Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, NY 14534
March 12, 2017
2nd Sunday in Lent



1. I'm amazed at the timeliness of our lectionary readings each week.
 - a. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."
 - i. I believe we have all had more than enough wind blowing this week.
 - b. Although my siblings and I were born in St. Louis, MO, Kalamazoo, MI and Wheeling, WV, the wind blew my brother, step-brother, and me to Atlanta GA on Memorial Day weekend 1996 (the same year Atlanta hosted the Summer Olympics).
 - i. Brother Ed had just graduated from Elon in North Carolina and was moving in with our older sister Hillary to look for his first job out of college.
 - ii. Stepbrother Brian has just earned his law degree from Northeastern University and was taking a position with the Georgia Resource Center which he now runs.
 - iii. And I was being promoted by GTE from my lobbying job in Washington DC to a sales position in their International Headquarters.
 - c. By that time, sister Hillary had worked for Sun Trust in Atlanta for a little more than ten years after having graduated from the University of Florida.

- d. She did a marvelous job of acclimating us when we moved there and made certain we benefited from the legendary southern hospitality.
 - i. One evening at dinner with some of her tennis buddies, I was struck by how she was speaking and I said to her, “Hillary, do you realize you have acquired a Southern accent?”
 - ii. Not wanting that to define her, she shot back, “I do not!”
 - e. Does our place of birth define our identity?
 - i. Many would answer this question, "Yes, of course it does."
 - ii. We often use a person's place of birth as a kind of tag, a handy label, which we can use to identify the way he thinks or the way she acts.
 - iii. We notice where a person was born, and we call her a native Rochesterian, an American, a German, a Kenyan, a Syrian, an Australian, a Russian, a Brazilian or a Jamaican.
2. Not everyone believes our place of birth defines our identity.
- a. Some define their identity (at least in part) by their alma mater.
 - i. After all, Thompsons, Penn State is the best, correct?
 - ii. After all, Tim Smith and Bruce Boak, Grove City is the best, correct?
 - iii. Or Meiningers, Syracuse rules, right?
 - b. Some define their identity by a sports team or teams.
 - i. New England Patriots are more than just Super Bowl champs to the Messengers, for example.

- ii. For others, the pin stripes of the New York Yankees will never be matched.
 - c. What defines Christ's identity? Is it where he was born?
 - i. Although he was born in Bethlehem, his father's hometown was Nazareth, and when he talked about his origins, he most often referred to God as his father.
 - ii. Christ taught one's spiritual birth is far more indicative of one's identity than one's physical birth.
- 3. Nicodemus wanted to nail down Christ's identity.
 - a. It was a night-time meeting, a secret, private meeting away from the crowds that hovered around Jesus during the day.
 - b. It was a safe place to ask a question, to ponder the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven with one who appeared to know.
 - c. Nevertheless, when Nicodemus came to Jesus, Nicodemus did not bring a question.
 - d. Instead, Nicodemus brought his own announcement of Christ's identity.
 - e. Nicodemus, with his many pedigrees: a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a teacher in Israel, came to Jesus and said, "I have seen your miracles, your signs and wonders, and I know that you are from God. I know who you are."
 - i. And Jesus answered him, "No, you haven't a clue. You saw me supply wine for the wedding feast. You saw me cleanse the temple of those who were making a business there and you think you can use this evidence to draw logical, rational conclusions.
 - ii. If this is your profession of faith, you know nothing of faith.
 - iii. Faith involves commitment and risks.

- iv. Your slipping over here in the dark of night to tell me who I am is not faith."
- f. Nicodemus made a statement and Jesus gave a rebuttal.
 - i. Then Nicodemus did ask a question, "How? How can this happen? How can these things be?"
 - ii. And Jesus answered these "How to" questions with a birth story.
 - 1. What an interesting conversation.
- g. Nicodemus came to Jesus because Nicodemus knew that Jesus knew the answers.
 - i. However, Nicodemus did not know the questions.
 - ii. Nicodemus wanted the accounting formula of how to win the prize, how to achieve for himself the life that was beyond his grasp, how to place himself in the presence of God.
 - 1. Nicodemus wanted the John 3:16 answer – if I believe in God (or at least say I do) I will have eternal life.
 - iii. Jesus recognized Nicodemus' searching and answered the questions which Nicodemus did not know how to ask.
 - 1. The questions which had driven Nicodemus to come to Jesus by night were probably more along the lines of
 - a. "Who am I?"
 - b. Why was I born?
 - c. Where do I belong?
 - d. How can I be at peace with who I am?

- e. How can I forgive myself for the mistakes I have made?
 - f. How can I rebuild broken relationships?
 - g. How can I forgive those who have hurt me?"
2. These are the kinds of questions which keep us up at night.
 3. However, the only questions Nicodemus knew how to ask were questions which reflected an accounting view of life - questions about balancing the ledger, questions reflecting the notion that when things add up, then they are the truth.
 - a. Jesus did not deal with the answers to these questions.
 - b. Instead, Jesus told Nicodemus a story of a birth, a story of being born of the Spirit.
- h. Jesus told Nicodemus that to be born of the Spirit would propel him along the way without any of his old fears, insecurities, anxieties, annoyances or angers.
 - i. To be born of the spirit would mean trusting God's love for him and for all people, even in the face of frightening life circumstances.
 1. A few weeks ago, many of you might have noticed Barb Smith stopped wearing her lovely head coverings.
 2. Her downy white hair had exquisitely filled in to the point that she was warm enough.
 3. Each time I see Barb, particularly in this busy week when RAIHN was here and kept adding

new families, I am struck by the beauty transcending her appearance.

- a. She has reflected to me how she feels born again – renewed in her energy, spirit and joie de vivre.
 - b. Barb is beautifully living out her birth story.
- ii. Being born of the spirit is not just bouncing back from a life-threatening illness.
1. Being born of the spirit can also be a result of a nodal event in our lives.
 - a. Earning a degree, celebrating a marriage, welcoming a new child, moving to a new town, starting a new job, or rejoicing in retirement are some of the many life changes giving us a chance to evaluate and improve our identities as blessed children of God.
 - i. My siblings and I felt as if we were experiencing a spiritual awakening when we moved into the Bible Belt.
 - ii. To this day, we consider our moving there on the same weekend not a coincidence, but a God-incidence.
 2. Being born of the spirit can also arise from what would otherwise be perceived as a negative nodal event.
 - a. When we reflect upon negative nodal events, we can choose to reframe them as getting a second chance, a do-over, a mulligan - the grace to move on from life circumstances or from one's mistakes and

on to what God intends for us to do with our spiritual gifts.

- i. Several years ago, several women from this congregation went with me to a Women of Faith weekend at the BC/BS arena where we saw STEVEN CURTIS CHAPMAN perform with his band which includes his wife and two of their sons.
- ii. For those of you who might not know him, Chapman is an award-winning contemporary Christian musician and the founder of a charity called Show Hope which not only cares for special needs orphans in China but helps them find loving homes.
 1. Our former DYM and his wife, Dan and Elizabeth Kulp, adopted one of their own children from Show Hope.
- iii. At the Women of Faith event, Mary Beth Chapman shared this witness:
- iv. On May 21, 2008, she and Steve were preparing to celebrate their son's HS graduation and their daughter's engagement when their older son, Will Chapman, accidentally drove over the youngest of their adopted daughters, Maria.
- v. Will Chapman was pulling into the driveway of their house after he auditioned for a musical at school and

Maria was running to meet him so she could ask him to put her on the monkey bars.

1. During the memorial service for Maria, the family expressed their faith in God and their love for one another.

- vi. They affirmed God's power to turn even this gale-force tragedy to the good.

1. They allowed themselves to be born anew, born of the spirit.

- iii. Nicodemus asked how to be born of the spirit, assuming he needed to do something to cause this to happen, and Jesus answered, "This is not about what you do.

1. You do not give birth to yourself.

2. God is the one who breathes life into you and gives you birth from above.

3. At your birth, blood is shed but it is not your blood.

4. It belongs to the God through whom you are born into life eternal.

5. Nicodemus asked Jesus "How to" questions and Jesus tells him about the God who gives birth to us.

4. This same God called Abraham and Sarah from barrenness to birth, calling into existence things in their life that did not yet exist.

- a. Abraham and Sarah were willing to trust God, moving from despair to hope, from old securities to new gifts, from death to life.

- b. Leaving what they knew to be true, they went where they had never been, away from all familiar markings and reference points, allowing their life to be reshaped by the One who came to them in a birth story.
 - i. This journey – this birthing – was not easy.
 - ii. They argued with Lot, they were uncertain about having any children, they had marital disputes, the traveling was long, hot and difficult, and once they did have a child, Abraham thought he would have to sacrifice him.
 - iii. But they relied upon God and God was faithful.
 - c. Abraham and Sarah were birthed into a new way of living and were blessed to be a blessing to others.
5. With each birth, we are given the opportunity to push through the pain and the discomfort towards the holy comfort and new beginning that is promised to come.
- a. Because we are human, it is not always easy to push through to the promise, but it is always possible with God's help.
 - b. Think about this week's windstorm.
 - i. Just as our scripture says, the wind blows where it chooses.
 - ii. It certainly did on Wednesday!
 - 1. I remain thankful for so many of you checking in on one another, giving people a place to sleep and shower, taking others' freezer food, and cleaning up yard debris.
 - 2. We are compassionate servant-leaders and hearty Rochesterians.
 - iii. Even with that unpredictable wind, we can look for and find God.

- iv. We can see evidence of God's renewing promises.
 - 1. Newness of life shows itself in dependable and predictable cycles.
 - 2. Each new morning the sun warms us.
 - 3. Each year, the crocuses come up.
 - a. In Rochester, they always get covered in snow again, but they do come up.
 - 4. Each season, God prepares the earth for its next critical life stage: birth, growth, harvest, and death as prelude to new life.
- v. God uses all of God's blessed creation to be a blessing to others.
 - 1. God invites us to see and respond to these blessings.
 - a. The invitation to Abraham and Sarah, the invitation to Nicodemus, the invitation to us, comes as a birth announcement.
 - b. Congratulations on being born of the Spirit!