

WHOLE NEW PERSON

by David Miller

KEY VERSE:

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

John 3:3

FAITH STORY:

John 3:1-21

FAITH FOCUS:

In order to comprehend the new birth (identity) that Christians must have, it is important to understand what Jesus means when he says, "You must be born from above". In our story, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night inquiring about the signs Jesus had done. Jesus told him that he must be born from above. Jesus teaches Nicodemus that one must be born of water and Spirit. Nicodemus misunderstands what Jesus is saying. Just as humans have all had a physical birth, Jesus calls persons to be born again from above. It is the Holy Spirit that gives a person birth into a new spiritual life and identity.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students realize the importance of being born of the Spirit and living out their new identity in Christ.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Participate in an exercise on what it means personally to be "born from above."
- Discuss the meaning of being "born again"
- Investigate and report on findings from Bible dictionaries about John 3
- Reflect and comment on the importance of "being" vs. "doing"
- Verbally state their understanding of what it means to be a new person in Christ and how that relates to them personally
- Optional: Be invited to participate in a baptism ceremony or choose to renew their baptism vows.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Optional: CD player and Casting Crowns CD cued to song, "Who Am I?"
- 2 3 x 5 sticky notes and pens for each student
- 3 On each sticky note (enough for each participant) write the name of a celebrity, political figure, cartoon character, book character, etc. Use a different person for each note.
- 4 Have enough copies of "Who I Am in Christ" handouts for each person
- 5 Bibles and 3 Bible Dictionaries (preferably NRSV) note: It would be helpful to have a red-

letter Bible for this reading.

6 Chalk board or dry erase board and markers

7 Optional: Towels and water-filled basin or bread and wine (grape juice)

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (7–10 minutes)

Greet students as they enter, and when all students have arrived, ask them to form a circle. Ask each student to say their name and what they will be doing as a career 10 years from now if their dreams would come true.

For the next activity, place a sticky note on the forehead of each participant. (Don't let students see the name you've written on the sticky note on their own forehead.)

Students are to figure out who they are by asking other students questions about their person. (The questions should have yes or no answers.)

When a student has guessed their identity, they can become a "consultant" who gives clues to those still trying to figure out their identities.

NOTE: *Be sure to choose characters that are high school youth would know.*

Examples: *Napoleon Dynamite, Sponge Bob Squarepants, John Wayne, George Bush, Hillary Clinton, Kermit the Frog, Abraham Lincoln, Bill Gates, etc.*

CONNECT: (5–7 minute)

Discuss: *How were you able to figure out the person on your sticky note? What were some of the questions asked? Were the questions based more on what the person did or were they centered on their character traits? All of these people have characteristics that make them who they are. Which type of questions helped you to figure out your person – ones based on their character and personality or ones based on what that person did?*

Transition statement: *"Many people today are wondering about their identity. We often try to find our identity in what we own, what we do, and who we associate with. People in the Bible had identity crises too. Today's story is about one of those people.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15–20 minutes)

Ask for three volunteers to read the scripture passage: one to read the narrative verses, one to read Jesus' parts, and one to read Nicodemus' part.

Then ask several other volunteers to look up "Nicodemus" in the Bible dictionary and tell the rest of the class what they found out about him.

(Nicodemus is the "cream of the crop" among the Jews. He is at the top of his field. He is a Jew, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest legal, legislative and judicial body of the Jews, and a highly respected teacher of the Old Testament Scriptures.)

Ask students to look up the phrase "born again" or "born from above" and report findings.

Ask students to look up "Jesus, teacher of Israel, and Rabbi" and report findings.

Ask, "What does Moses have to do with this passage in verse 14. What is Jesus referring to?"

Ask students to look up Numbers 21:4-9 and read it aloud.

Ask: *What is the reference Jesus is making here as he speaks to Nicodemus? How does this relate to our story?*

(Jesus tells him that just as people in Moses' day looked to the serpent as it was being lifted up, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so people may have eternal life. Also, stress that it is not the object that saves, but the Person.)

Say, "In this story, Jesus makes some profound observations, incorporating words that are opposite in meaning. Let's make a list of the opposite words that appear in this passage.

(Your list will include physical, spiritual, darkness, light, condemned, saved, born, old, flesh, Spirit, earthly, heavenly, perish, eternal life, evil, true.)

Ask: *What is going on here? Why do you think Jesus used this type of language? Was he trying to confuse Nicodemus even further? Was He trying to make it difficult for Nicodemus to receive eternal life? Why do you think Nicodemus sought Jesus out?"*

Say: *Nicodemus observed the miracles Jesus had performed. He knew that he couldn't hold a candle to Jesus. Nicodemus recognized the failure of Pharisaism. He saw that there was something more to life. Nicodemus didn't come to talk about himself or about Pharisaism. He came to find out about Jesus, his message, and his relationship to God. Jesus told him what that was. No amount of "doing" was enough to receive eternal life. Nicodemus had been "doing" most of his life. Jesus explained a new identity."*

Ask, "What does Jesus tell Nicodemus is necessary for this new identity to take place? What does Nicodemus have to do?"

(Nicodemus can't "do" anything. Jesus seeks to show Nicodemus that his system of religion does not, and cannot save anyone. Jesus is the only focus. Being born of the Spirit is the only way to eternal life.)

APPLY: (5–7 minutes)

Say, "Think back to our introduction of telling people what you'd like to be doing in ten years. Does this adequately describe who you are?"

Wait for answers.

Say: *Descriptions like that tell us what you do, not who you are. What was one of the common elements we used in asking questions about who our character was?"*

Wait for answers.

We asked about their profession. What was the implication behind Nicodemus' opening statement to Jesus? (Look at verse 2 again.) Nicodemus was focusing on Jesus' profession (Rabbi, teacher) and not who he really was. To be reborn by the Spirit of God makes one a new person, gives a new identity in Christ.

Ask, "How might we apply what Jesus taught Nicodemus to our lives today?"

Pass out the "Who I Am in Christ" sheets. Ask students to take a few minutes to look it over and pick out one verse that really speaks to them.

Say, "Now, I would like you to re-introduce yourself but this time, rather than saying what you would

like to be doing ten years from now, you will say something about your "being" based on what you see on this sheet, or any other way that you want to identify yourself with God and Jesus. For example: "My name is Dave and I am God's child" or "I am a beloved child of God"...

After students do this, say: Our identity is found in who God says we are, not what we do. Author Neil Anderson says, "Your behavior doesn't determine who you; who you are, determines your behavior". Just as Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born from above, so must we, and therefore walk and live in this new identity. Many times, this world will try to tell us our identity is in what we do, what we have, or what others say about us. Being born again, from above, gives us a new identity in Christ.

Optional: *Invite students to renew their commitment to live as being born from above. This could be done with a baptismal-renewal ceremony or by taking communion and recommitting to living in their new identity. Play the "Who Am I" CD by Casting Crowns. Invite each person to listen with a thankful heart for the new identity God has given each one of us.*

Close with a prayer and blessing for each student.

RESPOND: (7–10 minutes)

Plan a "Dwell In" with the students. Explain that a "Dwell In" is a retreat where they can spend some time in personal reflection, away from the demands of school, family, friends; and without the invasion of cell phones, television, IPODs, etc. Ask for their ideas of where they would like to have this retreat, when, and what elements they would like to involve. Are there some spiritual practices they would like at the treat? (You may want to do some research on spiritual practices so you can make suggestions.) If there are enough students willing to commit to attending this retreat, make plans for it to happen.

Close with a prayer, thanking God for dwelling among us, and for God's grace and mercy in our lives. Ask God to continue to reveal his presence among us as we are growing and leaning from day to day.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

To leave the condition of worldly existence and enter the realm of God's grace is often understood as a second, spiritual birth. Jesus said, "You must be born anew." The Christian who is born again in Christ becomes a child of God, experiences an intimacy with God, and has the Spirit of Christ dwelling in him/her. The old self dies away, with its worldly desires and false views. To be born again, the Christian undergoes the rite of baptism by which he/she becomes open to receive Christ and the Holy Spirit.

"The key pun in this passage (see, for example, Raymond Brown's Anchor Bible commentary, vol. 1, pp. 130ff.) is the Greek word *anōthen*, which can be translated as either "again" or "from above" — hence, Nicodemus' misunderstanding. He is thinking in terms of being born again, and Jesus is trying to get him thinking in terms of being born from above — or both, being born again from above. The key, it seems, is that the source of rebirth comes from outside this world. Things of this world are flesh; the source of true life and power comes from above by the Spirit."

"The Gospel of John takes us back to the image of birthing to understand how the power of God works. There Jesus says "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of

God.” (3:3) And Nicodemus wants to literalize Jesus’ statement. But Jesus comes back with talk of the “wind blowing where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” This is not a biology problem. Understanding egg and sperm and cell division does not explain how new life comes. We get a foretaste of what God’s creating, transforming power does in life. The Divine call then is to trust the creative, transforming power of God in our lives, the call that urges, entices us into an unknown future, a future that is filled with new possibilities.” It transforms and gives a totally new identity which is why Jesus uses birth as the metaphor. Born-again Christians have a new “genetic” make-up thanks to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Now when you hear someone say “born again Christian”, you should know what they mean. Being born again means internal changes—your heart, your motives, your thoughts. When you are born again, you no longer belong to this world, you belong to Jesus. And this new life is not temporary like our bodies, it is everlasting. And what is the source for this new life? Jesus is, of course. We know this because it is in the Word of God. The Word of God is our source for new life and identity.

WORKS CITED:

www.textweek.com, Lectionary & Commentary on John 3:1-17

Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary, Lent 2, by Paul Nuechterlein & Friends.

Process and Faith Lectionary Commentary, Lent 2A, Rick Marshall

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Who I Am In Christ

	I am accepted...
John 1:12	I am God's child.
John 15:15	As a disciple, I am a friend of Jesus Christ.
Romans 5:1	I have been justified.
1 Corinthians 6:17	I am united with the Lord, and I am one with Him in spirit.
1 Corinthians 6:19-20	I have been bought with a price and I belong to God.
1 Corinthians 12:27	I am a member of Christ's body.
Ephesians 1:3-8	I have been chosen by God and adopted as His child.
Colossians 1:13-14	I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins.
Colossians 2:9-10	I am complete in Christ.
Hebrews 4:14-16	I have direct access to the throne of grace through Jesus Christ.
	I am secure...
Romans 8:1-2	I am free from condemnation.
Romans 8:28	I am assured that God works for my good in all circumstances.
Romans 8:31-39	I am free from any condemnation brought against me and I cannot be separated from the love of God.
2 Corinthians 1:21-22	I have been established, anointed and sealed by God.
Colossians 3:1-4	I am hidden with Christ in God.
Philippians 1:6	I am confident that God will complete the good work He started in me.
Philippians 3:20	I am a citizen of heaven.
2 Timothy 1:7	I have not been given a spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind.
1 John 5:18	I am born of God and the evil one cannot touch me.
	I am significant...
John 15:5	I am a branch of Jesus Christ, the true vine, and a channel of His life.
John 15:16	I have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit.
1 Corinthians 3:16	I am God's temple.
2 Corinthians 5:17-21	I am a minister of reconciliation for God.
Ephesians 2:6	I am seated with Jesus Christ in the heavenly realm.
Ephesians 2:10	I am God's workmanship.
Ephesians 3:12	I may approach God with freedom and confidence.
Philippians 4:13	I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.