5-26/27-18 Rev. Amy Haines

John 3:1-17 Born of the Spirit

In our society, this weekend is the unofficial start of summer. Trips are being planned. Schedules shift gears. School is out for another year. Graduations are being celebrated.

For many people, one chapter of life has closed, and another is just beginning.

In our church calendar, this weekend is the beginning of Ordinary Time, also known as the Sundays after Pentecost. Last weekend we celebrated the end of the Easter Season with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost. After 40 days of being with Jesus between his resurrection and his ascension, after 10 days waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples closed one chapter of their faith journey, the chapter of walking with Jesus on this earth, and began a new chapter of their faith journey, the chapter of walking with the Holy Spirit.

For us here today, Pentecost is our hinge between celebrating Easter and living into ordinary time. Now is the time for us to figure out how to live with the good news we’ve been given.

Now is the time for us to figure out how to live as those led by the Spirit of God in the midst of everyday life.

Yet, we have to be honest. Are we ready to be led by the Spirit of God? Are we willing to be born of the Spirit? Are we open to going where the Spirit leads us, even if the direction is unknown or unfamiliar?

Admit it, how many of us are control freaks? How many of us like our calendars and our routines? We live in a world where corporations seek to control successes and failures by analyzing tones of data, and adjusting accordingly. We live in a world where even the church demands statistics such as professions of faith, attendance and baptisms in order to measure benchmarks of vitality. We live in a world where births are now often scheduled around busy schedules. Because my children were all born by c-section, Rachel was scheduled in such a way to stay away from 12-12-12. Timothy was due on December 24 yet scheduled for Dec 18 since my doctor was traveling to India after Christmas. Instead of waiting until the 18th, however, he uprooted everyone’s schedules and was born on the 6th!

We like to be in control. Or at least appear to be in control. We want to set our own schedules, and even sometimes choose our own consequences. Yet, in reality, much of life is not in our control.

This is as true in our faith lives as it is in our everyday lives. When we are open to God’s Holy Spirit moving in and through and among us, who knows where God might guide us next! One day we may simply be attending worship and the next day may find us saying yes to being involved in a specific mission or ministry.

One day we may be in a small group studying God’s word and the next day may find us tutoring or corralling 8 little kids or speaking out for children of immigrants or trying something new on behalf of the community of faith.

Thankfully, on those days when we go along with God kicking and screaming, or at least go along with God dragging our feet and mumbling under our breath, God doesn’t give up on us.

Sometimes God moves through us in spite of us! And sometimes God moves through us with our cooperation, and all we can do is hold on and trust God as we are led in new directions.

If you are a control freak who is hesitant about being led by the Spirit of God, know that you are not alone. The Gospel of John records a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, one of the Jewish religious leaders, that shows how reluctant Nicodemus was to believe all that he was seeing and hearing from Jesus.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, meaning he was one of the religious elite who upheld God’s Law personally and in society. We can presume he was rich, well educated, and a highly respected teacher.

Like most Jews, Nicodemus did not believe he was in need of a savior, for his heritage claimed him as a descendant of Abraham and heir to God’s covenant promises. Nicodemus was secure in his heritage, believing he had it all— until the new rabbi, Jesus, began to teach his radical concepts of God’s kingdom for all.

Nicodemus saw some of the miracles that Jesus was doing. He heard Jesus talk about God as one who knew God rather than just one who studied God’s Word. He immediately recognized what Jesus did and taught was different.

So under cover of darkness, Nicodemus risked his reputation to go to Jesus at night and ask this new teacher the questions he thought his soul was asking. Yet the conversation that followed with Jesus was nothing that Nicodemus expected and nothing that Nicodemus had ever encountered before.

Instead of swapping pleasantries and compliments, Jesus cuts straight to the heart of the conversation, straight to the basics of true faith.

 “I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

“I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Nicodemus believed that as a Pharisaic Jew he held the key to the kingdom of God simply by virtue of who he was and his place in society.

But Jesus upset any and all expectations when he told Nicodemus—and us here today—that it does not matter who we are or where we have been—university presidents, preachers, teachers, housewives, felons or forgotten kids—our status in society or even our faithfulness in the church are not the keys to God’s kingdom. Nothing we **do** will gain us entrance to God’s heavenly kingdom. No position in society will be greater than the lowliest believer in Jesus.

The only way to enter God’s kingdom is to be born from above, to receive God’s gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

When we accept that we have been born from above, we recognize that not only have we been saved from sin, we have also been saved to life in the Spirit. We like that first part, to know that we are forgiven, saved from sin. Yet sometimes our faith ends there, simply with our forgiveness. We forget that time and again in the Gospels and New Testament letters we are reminded that we are also saved to something, that something being life in the Spirit. We are called as those born of the Spirit to now live by God’s kingdom ways in this world.

This is what was radical for Nicodemus, and still is hard for us to live by here today. For as we said last week at Pentecost, the Spirit is unpredictable and powerful. The Spirit will move us away from our comfort zones in order to share the good news of Jesus and live out God’s message of compassion and justice. The Spirit will not leave us in our sin; neither will it leave us as we are when we come to faith in Jesus. God’s Spirit is God’s presence with us, which calls us to always learn, always grow, always respond to the love and grace that we have been given.

Jesus said it this way to Nicodemus:

Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’

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. (v7-8)

We cannot see the wind—yet we know the wind is there. We cannot see the wind—yet we can see the effects of the wind. We can feel a gentle breeze blowing around us on a hot day; we can see an angry gale that prunes trees with shallow roots; we can see the effect of the wind that lifts up kites into the air.

Jesus says that so it is with the Spirit in our lives. There will be times when the Spirit guides us to lovingly and gently reach out to another in need. There will be times when the Spirit comforts us or encourages us. And then there will be times when the Spirit will demand more of us, or will prune back the deadwood of our lives through people, ah-ha moments, or experiences.

This was a radical notion for educated Nicodemus, who accepted that the Spirit will move as the Spirit will move, and even he had learned and passed on the stories of faithful men and women in Israel’s history who were evidently moved by the Spirit to live for God in bold and powerful ways.

But for the Spirit to be poured out on all people, like at Pentecost? For the Spirit to be poured out on all people, young and old, men and women, and not just a specific few prophets and leaders? Nicodemus couldn’t fathom such an inclusive nature for the Spirit.

And nowadays, there are still many who agree with Nicodemus. They dismiss women in ministry. They challenge God speaking through youth. They struggle to let go of past mistakes to hear the good news from returning citizens.

Are we ready for God to love ALL the world, and pour out the Holy Spirit even on believers with whom we disagree? Are we ready to be those who love the entire world, the same world that hated Jesus? Are we willing to live life in the Spirit?

For the apostle John, born of the Spirit, willing to live life in the Spirit, meant that once you said yes to following Jesus, you said yes to finding ways to bring the kingdom of God into the midst of daily life.

For John Wesley, born of the Spirit, willing to live life in the Spirit, meant that once you said yes to following Jesus, you sought to daily live for him. Wesley called this sanctifying grace—the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that challenges us to be more like Christ.

When we are born from above, when we begin to live life in the Spirit, we begin to see the world around us in a different way, and allow the Holy Spirit to draw us deeper in faith.

When we open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit moving through us we also open ourselves up to God re-orienting our lives, re-birthing our character, renewing our foundation grounded in God’s unconditional love, the promise of new life, and the forgiveness of our sin through God’s Son Jesus.

.. Elizabeth Burns who was rudely awakened by the Holy Spirit and became one of God's most effective witnesses. She was a product of America's upper class and suffered through three broken marriages. Finally, so riddled with hurt and bitterness, one night she took thirteen high-dosage sleeping pills in an attempt to commit suicide. Her son found her unconscious and rushed his mother to the hospital where she hung between life and death. She slowly awakened but it was an awakening which was to be a total personal awakening in her soul as well as in her body. Her remembrance brought a sense of freedom

"as though the windows of my life had been washed, a part of me was left behind, a part old and hard and heavy. My mind was clear, it too had been washed and unencumbered and I understood for the first time what it means to be forgiven by God."

.. An old Army man who for more than 35 years had been a heavy drinker with a temperament of a top sergeant long after he had become a Colonel spoke before a group of doctors. He said he'd had a personality change and now he was as temperate as he had once been intemperate, as considerate as he had once been severe, as concerned for others as he had once been selfish. In the audience was a psychiatrist of the school which says that personalities are set very early and who protested that at his age you can't have a personality change.

"Well," replied this member of Alcoholics Anonymous, "at least I am under new management."

.. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, found himself at age 35 a dejected and rejected ex-missionary whose preaching turned people off more often than it turned them on. Then one night at a Moravian prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, the Holy Spirit broke through the life of this broken Anglican pastor who felt for the first time that "God had forgiven my sins, even mine."

It was the event which lifted the veil in Wesley's life and the beginning of the great revival which some historians believe saved 18th century England from the fate that befell France in the French Revolution.

 -- William Quick “The Man Who Came By Night” 2-28-99 day1.org

No matter how successful or how broken our lives have been, no matter how pious or how prodigal we have acted, God loves us with an unconditional love. And God offers us the gift of salvation, of life eternal, of new birth if only we are willing to believe in his Son Jesus and willing to follow the uncontrollable Spirit. We are called to be born from above. We are called to be born of water and Spirit.We are called to trust in God’s Word, which proclaims:

“For 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.”

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,

but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Elizabeth Randall reminds us:

“God loved the world so much as to send the only Son to turn our lives upside down and inside out, to tumble us and transform us in the wind of the Spirit, to make our lives so different

it’s as if we had been born into a different world.”

 -Elizabeth Randall, Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual 2-A, p. 80

How many of you like to drive a car?

..Two things are essential for you to enjoy any car that you buy.

The first is a set of keys. The key lets you into the car. It'll help you open the trunk or the glove box or whenever necessary to lift the hood on the car. It's what you need to crank up the engine. You can admire the car from the outside or even sit quietly inside it, but you're not going anywhere without the keys.

What the keys are to the car, conversion is to the Christian life. You don't enter the Christian life because you're born into a Christian family or because you attend a church where the Bible is taught, or even because you learn verses from a book called the Bible. You enter the Christian life through only one way: the key—Jesus Christ.

…The second essential you need for your car is fuel. Don't try to save money by filling up your tank with water from your garden hose and hope your car will run. The engine was designed to run on fuel.

What the fuel is to the car, the Spirit of God is to the authentic, normal Christian life. Colossians 2:6 explains it like this: "As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him." As you have received Christ (your key), so walk in Him (allowing the Spirit to lead you and guide you).

 --adapted from Charles Swindoll “What Does It Mean to be Filled with the Spirit?” preaching.com

When we try to live as a Christian, yet aren’t open to the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are like a car that can’t be driven because it has run out of fuel. We might be able to coast along for a while, yet at some point we will burn out or hit an obstacle or be faced with an uphill battle that we cannot handle on our own. God may not take us away from our challenges, yet God promises to be with us in the midst of our challenges. God will not only be with us beside the still waters, but also through the dark valleys. God will continue to reach out in love to us even when the world hates God. And remember that God’s promise of salvation through faith in Jesus is for everyone who believes, not just a select few. God’s promise of the Holy Spirit is for everyone who believes, not just a privileged class.

This was a radical message for Nicodemus long ago, and is still a radical message for us today.

We are all called to not only be Easter people, but Pentecost people. To believe in Jesus as a crucified and risen Savior and Lord as well as to trust in a God that is with us always through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

As Pastor Edward Markquart puts it:

..What does it mean to born of the Spirit? To have the Spirit of Christ living inside of us. It means to have the love of Christ, the joy of Christ, the peace of Christ, the patience of Christ,

the kindness of Christ, the goodness of Christ, the faithfulness of Christ, the gentleness of Christ, the self-control of Christ living inside of us. It is having the Spirit of Christ taking up residence in us and living within us.

-Edward Markquart sermonsfromseattle.com Gospel Analysis John 3.1-17

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we spend the summer and fall in Ordinary Time, as we ponder God’s Word in this season after Pentecost, are you ready to be born of the Spirit? Are you willing to be led by the Spirit of God? Are you willing to step out in faith and trust this summer, allowing God to grow you? Are you willing to praise God, Father Son and Holy Spirit?

The Gospel of John never says whether Nicodemus came to believe in Jesus that night, or went home to ponder all that he had heard. We do know he shows up twice more in the Gospel of John. First, he advises his colleagues to investigate Jesus more thoroughly before they rush to judgement. Finally, he brings a personal donation of one hundred pounds of aloe and myrrh to be used for the anointing of Jesus’ body for burial following the crucifixion.

From this progression we can hope that Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus.

And if there is hope for Nicodemus, there is hope for you and I.

May our lives give glory to God, in word and deed, in thought and action, in worship and service, in honor and praise.

Let us pray.