



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN**  
*or*  
**WHO WANTS TO START ALL OVER?**  
John 3:1-10

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The last several weeks I have been talking with you about how each of the four Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – painted their individual portrait of Christ by a *different* slant of light ... by the light given to them. And how *different* and how *beautiful* each of the Gospels is. We examined Matthew, Mark and Luke's portraits of Christ, their unique meaning of the Good News. Today we finish up the series with a look at John's portrait.

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**John's Gospel has been called "The Spiritual Gospel" or "The Mystical Gospel." Its symbol is the eagle. This Gospel SOARS. Sometimes it flies near an almost blinding light.**

Some of John seems the *model of simplicity*; other parts seem *terribly complex*. One commentator wrote: "*In its waters a child can wade and an elephant can swim.*" It's given out at *Billy Graham crusades* to new Christians. However, when *Origen*, the most brilliant theologian of the third century, began his commentary on John, he wrote 32 books of notes on the first 13 chapters of John alone. Some of its verses are among the most memorized of all verses; for example John 3:16. ***Yet theologians and literary scholars are still confounded by its depths.***

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**The SAYINGS of Jesus in the GOSPELS are of *three kinds ... three categories*:**

- 1) An accurate history of Jesus' words passed along through memory in the oral transmission, then translated into Greek.
- 2) A capturing of the ideas of Jesus' words in paraphrased form.
- 3) Words the early church heard the Living Christ speaking to them *through the Spirit*, were adapted and then they extended the *meaning* of Jesus' words to the church living 40-70 years *after* his death and resurrection.

John's Gospel has more of category 3 than 2; and more of 2 than 1. ***It's what Jesus himself, in John, said would happen:***

*"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth..."* (John 16:12-13a)

**This is pretty astonishing. The SPIRIT will *teach us* what Jesus *COULD NOT ... DID NOT*. The SPIRIT is *STILL ALIVE, STILL GUIDING and STILL TEACHING*. If that makes YOU nervous, it has made the CHURCH nervous for two thousand years. CONSERVATIVES and LIBERALS alike want a Jesus we can *proof text* and *pin down*. But Jesus says: "LISTEN to the SPIRIT."**



**John's Gospel is *strikingly* different from the other three: Matthew, Mark and Luke.** These we call the "*Synoptic Gospels.*" *THEY* see with "*one eye*" while *JOHN* sees with *another.*

Let me list for you some of the differences I see:

**John's Gospel is *different* in *CHRONOLOGY.*** There is, for example, an early Judean ministry, and the cleansing of Temple occurs early in Christ's ministry instead of after what we call *Palm Sunday* in the other gospels.

**In John we have the astounding *I AM* sayings:**

*I AM the light of the world.*

*I AM the door.*

*I AM the way, the truth and the life.*

*I AM the good shepherd.*

*I AM the bread of life.*

*I AM the vine.*

*I AM the resurrection and the life.*

**In John, instead of Jesus' *short sayings* and *parables* we have *LONG, HIGHLY SYMBOLIC DISCOURSES.***

**If what we experience in Jesus is both "*GENUINE HUMANITY*" and "*GENUINE DIVINE PRESENCE,*" as I shared with you a couple of weeks ago as I spoke of Mark's Gospel, *John's Gospel emphasizes the DIVINE PRESENCE.* Jesus is *HUMAN*, all right, in John: He *weeps*, gets *thirsty*, gets *angry* and *tired.* But the author of John stands *STUNNED* by the *DIVINE LIGHT* he saw in Jesus.**

**Who *WROTE* John?** There's no way to know for sure. But the author says that his *main authenticating eyewitness source* was the figure described as: "...*the disciple whom Jesus loved... the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?'*" (John 21:20, 24)

*WHO was this disciple? The question is a tantalizing one, but neither Dan Brown (of The da Vinci Code fame) nor Leonardo da Vinci knows.*

**John's Gospel appears to have been *WRITTEN* in the last decade of the first century ... the *LAST* of the four Gospels to be written.** And it appears to have been written in *STAGES.* One of those *STAGES* reveals an *anguished* and *bitter conflict* between the church and the synagogue, an intra-family *quarrel* which resulted in Christian Jews being cast out of the synagogues. Some of the *language* of John reflects this *devastating conflict*, and some of it has been *tragically used to fuel anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism.*

★ **Folks, please remember that the Scriptures are a *DIVINE / HUMAN CREATION.* It does us no good to *ignore* the *HUMANITY* of the Bible; to *ignore its HUMANITY* can lead to *INHUMANE* uses of the Bible.**



Alright ... that's an *overlong*, but *necessary* introduction to this *REMARKABLE* and *COMPLEX* Gospel.

**Now let's move to my *One-Minute Outline* of the Gospel.**

**The Gospel begins with a *PROLOGUE,*** an elegantly written *hymn* or *theological poem.* To appreciate it best, we should put it to music, sing it, chant it ... much like we did today when we sang the fourth-century hymn based on John's prologue: *Of the Father's Love Begotten.*

The **PROLOGUE** is John's answer to the question: *When did the story of Jesus begin?* His answer? *All the way back at the dawn of creation.* MARK began Jesus' story at his baptism. MATTHEW traced Jesus' family tree to Abraham. LUKE'S genealogy began with Adam. JOHN goes to CREATION itself:

***In the beginning was the word [LOGOS in the Greek],  
and the word was with God  
and the word was God.***

It is amazing, but in one poetic stroke John unites Hebrew thought and Greek philosophy: *The HEBREW belief in the creative word of God that brought the world into being; the GREEK belief in the logos as the ordering principle of the universe.* Add to that the Hebrew personification of "wisdom" as the daughter of God. What we have is: the **WORD OF GOD** that made the world; the **LOGOS**, the ordering principle of the universe; **WISDOM**, the daughter of God; *has become flesh and dwelt among us. Bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh.*

***Could there be a more ASTONISHING notion?*** The poem ends:

*"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." (John 1:18)*

With the **PROLOGUE** finished, John's Gospel is divided into **TWO PARTS**: The **BOOK OF SIGNS** and the **BOOK OF GLORY**.

In John, **miracles** are called "**SIGNS**." I like that, because that's exactly what miracles do: **Point beyond themselves to God**.

***A MIRACLE is not an interruption of REALITY. It's a REVEALING of reality at its deepest and best – life as God would want it ALL the time.***



In John, the first miracle is unique to John's Gospel: **Turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana.** **What a way to begin a career!** I love this miracle. "WHY," you ask? Because it reveals something **SO IMPORTANT** about **GOD**, and about **JESUS**, and about God's **KINGDOM**. *The kingdom of God is filled with JOY ... like the JOY at a wedding feast.* [Have you ever been to an Italian Wedding reception? Talk about JOY!]

★ **Folks, if there's NO ELEMENT OF JOY in **YOUR** understanding of the kingdom of God ... well, it's **NOT** the kingdom of God; only something **YOU** are trying to make.**

The Russian novelist, Dostoevsky [duh-stuh-yef-skyee], caught the spirit of this in his final novel, generally considered the culmination of his life's work, *The Brothers Karamazov* [kar-a-maz-ov]: *"Ah, that sweet miracle! He worked his first miracle to help men's gladness ... He who loves men, loves their joy."* (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: Heritage, 1949), p.277.)



Part One of John, *The Book of Signs*, has **seven great SIGNS or MIRACLES**. It also has a set of **extraordinary theological conversations**: With **Nicodemus**, with the **Samaritan woman by the well**, with the **blind man at the pool**, and with **Mary and Martha** when their brother Lazarus dies.

What I want to do for the last part of this sermon, is focus on Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. There is something here that we **dare not miss** if we are to understand the underlying meaning of this conversation. For you see, Nicodemus stands for the **best and brightest of religious traditions** ... **THEN** and **NOW**:

➔ He's the **religious professional** who's spent his life trying to follow the way of God.

- ➔ He's the *seminary professor* with his books of theology.
- ➔ He's the *youth minister* teaching the communicant's class.
- ➔ He's the *long-time elder* and *church leader* giving of himself in so many ways to the church he loves.

**Nicodemus comes to the conversation with a *theological system* in his mind ... one that he has worked on, given himself to all of his life. But Jesus comes with a *mystery to proclaim* ... **THE MYSTERY OF NEW BIRTH ... BORN FROM ABOVE. "You must be born ANEW, AGAIN, from ABOVE."****

We sometimes shy away from this passage with its talk about being "born again," or "born anew," or "born from above" – the Greek can mean ALL of these things. I think it is *intentionally ambiguous, mysterious*. We "shy away" because some self-proclaimed "born again" Christians have made it a **BADGE of SPIRITUAL PRIDE**, something that makes *them* REAL CHRISTIANS and *others* QUASI-CHRISTIANS or PSEUDO-CHRISTIANS. And it's *not limited* to just that adjective. Christians do the same thing with other adjectives: *Pentecostal* Christian, *baptized-in-the-Holy-Spirit* Christian, *evangelical* Christian, *orthodox* Christian. All the adjectives are used to INVALIDATE others. **What's wrong with just plain "CHRISTIAN"?**



**Let's think for a few minutes about the mystery of "new birth" Jesus is talking about with Nicodemus.**

**Nicodemus says to Jesus:** "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." (John 3:2)

**And then Jesus goes straight to the heart of the matter:** "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (or born anew or born again)." (John 3:3)

**Nicodemus trips over the ambiguity:** "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4)

**Jesus then answers in the language of mystery:** "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 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." (John 3:5-8)

**This "NEW BIRTH" is NOT like a *syllogism*, NOT like a *theorem* ... it is like the WIND! It's NOT a *theological system* or *creed*, NOT a *political ideology* ... it is like FLIGHT! Just as John's Eagle soars in the wind!**

**How DIVERSELY, how WONDROUSLY we are BORN into the kingdom of God:**

- ➔ Some so *dramatically* that life completely changes in one day; others so *slowly*, so *imperceptibly* they cannot say when the moment was they were not a Christian and now are.
- ➔ Some enter the kingdom by *life-reversing conversion*; others by *growth, day by day, year by year, season of life by season of life*.
- ➔ *The wind blows as it wills.*



American Congregational clergyman and theologian, Horace Bushnell, wrote in the nineteenth century, that IF the church does its job RIGHT in "Christian nurture...the child will grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise."

***That's true for some of YOU. But that's NOT how it always is, even if Christian parents and churches do their best.***

Jesus tells us that everyone must undergo a spiritual transformation as they discover themselves. We're not just a material being made up of flesh and blood, atoms and molecules, BUT A CHILD OF GOD, a spiritual being with a spiritual destiny. **It is about being cognizant as we grow in our life with God ... recognizing the DIVINE PRESENCE within EACH and EVERY ONE OF US.**

***There is NO one way this happens. But it MUST HAPPEN, if we are to BE who God MADE US TO BE.***

For the young people who are here today, what I'm talking about for you is affirming who you are as a CHILD OF GOD and determining to follow Jesus' path of spirituality in the world. It's reflecting on the tradition of faith handed down to you by your parents and this church and claiming faith for yourself. Standing on your own two feet. Then deciding to follow Jesus' feet.



**People sometimes use the phrase "born again" as if it's a one-time, once-and-for-all thing: Are you "born again"? When did it happen?**

I think I would say for myself: I can't remember when it FIRST happened. I remember being a child in church and believing. I can remember the day I joined the church and how important it was for me to say clearly and publicly, "I'm a follower of Jesus." But I think this being BORN ANEW is still happening to me, in some way almost every day.

***It's a DAILY DYING to what is FALSE and WRONG, and a DAILY RISING to what is GOOD and BEAUTIFUL and TRUE.***

I really like the way theologian, Marcus Borg puts it: "Spirituality is about the process of being born again and again and again and again and again." (Marcus Borg, The Heart of Christianity (Harper San Francisco, 2003), p.120.)

Being "born again," he says, is about the "personal transformation at the center of the Christian life."

**And I contend that it's ALSO about the transformation of the world ... what Paul called the "new creation" and what Jesus called the "kingdom of God." ***But it starts RIGHT HERE ... with YOU and with ME ... at the level of the person, and with being born again and again and again and again and again.*****



A number of years back, Life magazine had photographs of two people's blood vessels highly magnified. One was of a new-born baby; the other was of a man in his 50's. The baby's blood vessels looked like clean, clear, glass tubes. The man's looked like a corroded steel pipe, all gunky and clogged. Too many bacon cheeseburgers and cigarettes.

Those photographs point to the attraction of new birth. Being able to start all over again! Clean, fresh, new.

**But new birth has its fears attached to it: "What will I have to give up ... what will I have to change?" I've got a lot invested in my way of thinking and living, believing. Who wants to start all over?"**

Jesus says, "Do not be afraid. Let the SPIRIT take care of that. It's all the SPIRIT'S work anyway."

All God needs is the *courage* of your *CONSENT*, and the *grace* of *LETTING GO*.  
Then let's see all *YOU* and *GOD* can *DO ... as together we follow Jesus' feet*.  
*Amen and Amen.*