

Rev. Janet Doyle  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
March 14, 2021  
Scripture: John 3: 1-21

## **Sermon: Life Together: The Miracle of Birth**

Max Lucado in his new book, *Begin Again*, tells an amazing story that I would like to share with you:

“By all rules, Skinner was a dead man.” With these words Arthur Bressi begins his retelling of the day he found his best friend in a WWII Japanese concentration camp. The two were high school buddies. They grew up together in Mount Carmel, PA. The two of them were inseparable. It made sense, then, that when one joined the army, the other would as well. They rode the same troopship to the Philippines. That’s where they were separated. Skinner was on Bataan when it fell to the Japanese in 1942. Arthur Bressi was captured a month later.

Through the prison grapevine, Arthur learned the whereabouts of his friend. Skinner was near death in a nearby camp. Arthur volunteered for work detail in the hope that his company might pass through the other camp. One day they did.

Arthur requested and was given five minutes to find and speak to his friend. He knew to go to the sick side of the camp. It was divided into two sections – one for those expected to recover, the other for those given no hope. Those expected to die lived in a barracks called “zero ward.” That’s where Arthur found Skinner. He called his name, and out of the barracks walked the seventy-nine pound shadow of the friend he had once known.

Arthur writes: I stood at the wire fence of the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp on Luzon and watched my childhood buddy, caked in filth and racked with the pain of multiple diseases, totter toward me. He was dead; only his boisterous spirit hadn’t left his body. I wanted to look away but couldn’t. His blue eyes, watery and dulled, locked on me and wouldn’t let go. Skinner’s body was a dormitory for tropical diseases. He couldn’t eat. He couldn’t drink. He was nearly gone.

Arthur didn't know what to do or say. His five minutes were nearly up. He began to finger the heavy knot of the handkerchief tied around his neck. In it was his high school class ring. At the risk of punishment he'd smuggled the ring into the camp. He had been saving it to barter for medicine or food for himself, but one look at Skinner, and he knew he couldn't save it any longer.

As he told his friend good-bye, he slipped the ring through the fence into Skinner's frail hand and told him to "wheel and deal" with it. Skinner objected, but Arthur insisted. He turned and left, not knowing if he would ever see his friend alive again.

Arthur had something in his hand that he could give to Skinner that could possibly change his life.

Well, do you want to know what happened to Skinner? He took the ring and buried it in the barracks floor. The next day he took the biggest risk of his life. He approached one of the "kindest" guards and passed him the ring through the fence. The guard asked if it was valuable. Skinner assured him that it was. The soldier smiled and slipped the ring into a pocket and left. A couple of days later he walked past Skinner and let a packet drop at his feet. Medicine. A day later he returned with more medicine. Then came a new pair of pants and some canned beef. Within three weeks Skinner was on his feet. Within three months he was taken to the healthy side of the sick camp. In time he was able to work. As far as Skinner knew, he was the only American ever to leave the Zero Ward alive.

Arthur and Skinner both survived and returned home. Skinner came over to Arthur's house for a visit one day. He had a gift for Arthur, a small box. Arthur knew immediately what it was. It was an exact copy of the high school ring.

It is an amazing true story. Skinner was almost dead when Arthur found him, but because of the ring and the help of the guard, he was given new life. It was almost as if he was born again. I'm sure he felt that way when he was starting to get better. If you have ever been really sick and feeling close to death and then you have a change in your health and you begin to heal and feel stronger, it is like you have new life and you are born again. Getting your COVID-19 Vaccine is almost like feeling you have new life—more freedom from the virus.

Recently I watched a virtual event by the organization Voice of the Martyrs in which a man, Dan Baumann, shared his story about his 9-week imprisonment in Iran because he was a Christian. It was a life changing nine weeks in which he faced daily beatings and psychological abuse and hadn't done anything wrong to even be there. He only went to Iran with a friend for a two-week vacation and to experience the people, but on his way out of the country they arrested him. At several points in his imprisonment, he tried to end his life. He said Jesus came to him in his prison cell and told him he still belonged to him. When he was suddenly released from prison he said he really appreciates everything around him and doesn't take anything for granted. It was like a rebirth for him.

The Bible says that we are destined to die once, and after that, to face judgment in Hebrews 9:27. Therefore, there is no rebirth again and again. However, Christians believe in being "born again." Jesus said that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. (John 3:3)

This raises the question, "How can a person enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born?"

Nicodemus, a religious teacher, was struggling with this very issue when he came by night to speak with Jesus. It was a miracle and an act of courage on his part that he came to see Jesus at all. Because Nicodemus came at night emphasized the fact that he was serious about understanding what Jesus taught because he knew something was missing in his life. He came in the dark of night looking for light.

Nicodemus knew there was something special about Jesus—that He was a teacher who had come from God. Jesus said to Nicodemus that he must be born again. Nicodemus was puzzled, "How can someone be born when he is old?"

Jesus clarified that this "rebirth" is not a physical rebirth but a spiritual birth. To be born again is to be changed completely. Another way to say, "Born Again" is "Born anew" or "Born from Above."

You can't see the spiritual birth, but it is real. Just as you can't see wind, nevertheless it is real. You hear the sound of the wind but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

“How can this be?” asked Nicodemus. Nicodemus lacked belief. Jesus said, “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?”

All his life, Nicodemus taught others that they could earn God’s approval by following a list of rules. And now Jesus is explaining something different that we simply need only to believe in Jesus to be born again and become His children.

You need to be willing to accept the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life offered by Jesus. Jesus provides us a way of salvation for all sinners, all of us.

Jesus died for our sins. He took our place on the cross. Jesus was buried and three days later, he came back to life. Because Jesus rose from the dead, He can give you a new beginning, a new life, a rebirth in a sense whose you are and whom do you belong to.

When we believe in Jesus, we are forgiven of our sins and born again, not from our mother, but from God.

There is a fundamental change that happens deep inside, in the soul, in the heart of that person, and it comes from the grace and power of God.

The concept of rebirth or born from above is very important in the New Testament. You must be born of the Spirit to understand the spiritual things of God.

- 1 Peter 1:3 “In God’s great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope.”
- 1 Peter 1:23 “For you have been born again...through the living and enduring word of God.”
- Titus 3:5 “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”
- 2 Corinthians 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”
- Even in the Old Testament it says in Ezekiel 36:26, “A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you.”

How many times in our lives have we heard those words of Jesus and thought “Very good, but that’s a bit radical for me. I’m not that comfortable with change. I like me just the way I am. I don’t need to change my life and follow Jesus. I know about Jesus.”

It isn't good enough to know "about" Jesus, but you need to "know" Jesus. It means having a relationship with him just as you do with your good friend.

Nicodemus came to Jesus knowing there was something lacking in his life. Jesus saw the root of the problem and told him what was needed but how many of us are like Nicodemus, not willing to change our lives to be born from above.

Christianity is not something that you can understand by discussion, argument, reading or listening to sermons. It is something that has to be experienced.

"I tell you the truth," says Jesus to Nicodemus and us all. "Unless a person is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

"Only God's Spirit can change you into a child of God. Don't be surprised when I say that you must be born from above. Only God's Spirit gives new life."

Jesus is saying that our whole life needs to be remade and relived with him as the Creator. You must be washed clean and you must be made new. It is like building a new house after you take down the old new. It isn't remodeling; it is new construction.

This change of life and our eternal life comes only from Jesus, the one who died and was lifted up on the cross, bearing the curse of your sins. Notice the parallel to the story of Moses in the Old Testament that Jesus reminds Nicodemus. Moses said to the Israelites who had sinned against God and were being bitten by venomous snakes, "Anyone can look at the snake and live." This is when God told Moses to lift up the snake on the pole and anyone who is bitten by a snake would live." Our scripture lesson says, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Look to Jesus, our Savior on the cross, and live knowing you are born from above.

"For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him will not die but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and live.

Life is a miracle when you are born the first time from your mother, and life is a miracle when you are born again in the Name of Jesus from above.

This is the day. Have your life changed and accept Jesus as your Savior for He died to give you life and your life hope and purpose.