

How Do We Begin Again?

I want to begin with a story from Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow. He says “In December of 2021, our family, four generations strong, remotely surrounded my grandmother through our screens and said out good byes. There she lay, prone on a hospital bed, her family bathing her with words of love, gratitude and permission to let go. Soon after our call, she was removed from life support and succumbed to complications from COVID. In the days and weeks to follow, my heart ached and broke over and over again, not only for our family, but so many others whose future had one more empty chair.

Not a year later, I too found myself lying prone in a hospital bed suffering from complications from COVID. While I was able to avoid being placed on a ventilator, for days I was unable to walk on my own or complete sentences of more than a few words. Fully vaxxed, a breakthrough case of COVID had my family again terrified that heartbreak and sorrow would soon make their mark and that the empty chair would be mine.

My grandmother, friends, colleagues, and thousands of others did not make it back home, but I did. To this day, I give thanks for my life and hold dear the questions that it has forced upon me as I venture into a new life, a new beginning and in many ways, an experience of being born again.

After my release from the hospital, it became clear that long-COVID would have a grip on me for the long haul. With great trepidation, I made the decision to leave the church I was serving. During that discernment period, the battle in my mind raged. On one side, the voices of toxic productivity and misplaced martyrdom were causing me to doubt what I was feeling and screaming at me to push through it. On the other side, persistent whispers reminded me that I need not progress to a physical or mental crisis before tending to my health, prodding me to choose to heal before my health made the choice for me. Contrary to so many cultural cues, I thought, “I choose me today, so we may all have a better tomorrow.”

The beauty of holding the question about being born again – raised by Nicodemus speaks to my soul and what it means to start again. I made the choice to start over or to be born again, not out of the immediate urgency of a crisis, but out of a yearning for what could be.

I grieve the loss of the ministry that would never be for that particular calling, but I know what it was the right act for me and for the community if either of us is to thrive in the future.

As you think about being born again, ask yourself “Do I believe in the possibility of new beginnings?” And, when the opportunities are revealed before you, “Will I be willing to step into the promise of what may be.”

As we look at our scripture for today, it has in it that well known verse of John 3:16, which may be one of the most famous verses in the Bible. And yet, most people don’t know the context in which these words are said.

Most people don’t know that Jesus says this famous sentence to a man named Nicodemus in the middle of the night. Maybe you’re even asking yourself, who is Nicodemus and why are they talking in the middle of the night?

Nicodemus was actually a very important person in Jerusalem. He was a Pharisee and represents the religious establishment. This story is told in a time when people were not free to choose their religion – the idea of being or believing something other than what the religious establishment told you went against the established norms.

People couldn't change from one set of beliefs to another, from one tribe to another without suffering enormous consequences. As a powerful member of the Pharisees, Nicodemus was a member of the ruling Sanhedrin when religious leaders ruled society.

So Nicodemus comes by cover of darkness, kind of skulks into the presence of Jesus in order to find out what all the fuss is about. And Jesus tells this powerful member of the Sanhedrin that everything he stands for, the wisdom of the ages, all the religious doctrine, all the institutional power, his tribes status quo – everything that Nicodemus considers truth, needs to be cast aside.

“The truth of the matter is, unless one is born again, one cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Jesus is telling Nicodemus to go back to the very beginning! To begin again, to see the world, to see God in a whole new way. And as we see from the conversation, Nicodemus cannot or will not.

Today, churches and members of churches are in much the same place as poor old Nicodemus – all that we hold dear is being challenged by the world around us. “The truth of the matter is, unless one is born again, one cannot see the kingdom of God.

Like Nicodemus, sometimes the church has blinders on. We get so focused upon preserving all that we love about the church and all the wonderful things we love about what has happened in the church, that we forget to look forward, right? And when you are moving forward but always looking backward, what happens? Eventually you will hit a wall!

The church has to move forward to become relevant. Central has always done that. Whether you realize it or not, this church has constantly made changes. Let me illustrate this.

As some of you know, after the great flood of 2022, we are still cleaning up. I have been going through the flood boxes of the archives and trying to get it organized in a new room on the third floor. And I am finding some really cool stuff and some really weird stuff.

For instance, I found this book here, that was used for a parenting class right here at Central. It is entitled, Parent Roles, His and Hers. The first lines of this book is” Men are not always willing to let their wives be women, nor women to let their husbands be men. Furthermore, the full power of parenthood can be gained only if you mothers be mothers and you fathers be fathers.

Some more gems. “Who handles the family emergencies? Not father; he operates best when he has self-confidence, and he has this only when he knows what is going to happen and is all ready for it. Mother ordinarily is far better able to handle the emergencies they are just dull routine for her.

The book ends with these words of wisdom, “When you try to picture all this in a sort of living painting, you see father out in front of the family, leading the way, first braving the dangers but also challenging to high adventure. Mother brings up the rear guard, helping each child in his efforts to follow Dad's lead.

The truth of the matter is, unless one is born again, one cannot see the kingdom of God.

I am sure that the people of Central have begun again in seeing a different way of parenting their children.

The other thing that I found in the archives was the draft program report for the new activity center from August of 2002. It was an analysis of the desired and required spaces and activities envisioned for a new facility that would be built upon the land occupied by the existing Activities building and the lots immediately to the north.

2002 was when the CDC was formed for this endeavor. And in this book it says that the Community Development Corporation's mission was to facilitate development initiatives to benefit under-served communities and populations and to support outreach activities of central church.

As we know, the real estate market fell apart a few years later and this new building never happened. Until now. When we are looking at building a new building that will benefit under-served communities and populations who are living on the streets. And we are going to rehab our 6 floors in the church house so that they function properly and we have an amazing facility to do mission and ministry in. All of that will be discussed right after worship today on the second floor and I encourage you to attend that town hall.

To answer our question for today, this is how we start again!!! By bringing the right partners along side of us, by putting the past behind us, by stopping ourselves from walking into walls because we are too busy looking behind us.

We are a people who lay claim to the power of the resurrection to keep the dream alive. Like Nicodemus, our focus upon maintaining the status quo, our desire to hold on to the things we love about the church, this focus may have stalled us from moving forward to where God is calling us to go.

Like Nicodemus, we too can be born again, we can begin again.

Let's look at our art for today from artist Carmelle Beaugelin. She says "I was raised in a Spanish speaking Pentecostal church in Miami called "Renacimiento." A simple translation of *renacimiento* to English means "rebirth" or "renaissance." For my small Pentecostal church, *renacimiento* meant far more than the symbolism of being "born again" Christians. It was a perpetual reminder that each time the saints gather to encounter Jesus, the Spirit calls us to continuous transformation, calling dead things into new life and Holy Spirit filled revival.

It is no wonder that Nicodemus seeks Jesus in the cover of darkness of night. It is in the quiet of night that our deepest fears startle us awake, that our anxieties of the day keep us from sound rest, and that the fear of the death of our dreams and bodies loom.

Yet Jesus challenges Nicodemus' seeking the night with a call to be born again, to *renacimiento*. Not just improvement but transformation. Not simply resuscitation of what is and was, but a complete resurrection of what could and will be.

In this image, a metaphorically disrobed, aging and vulnerable Nicodemus, surrounded by the milky gray swirls of water and spirit, wonders: How can this be? Haven't I reached past my benchmarks? How is it that you are calling me to begin again?

We may see ourselves in Nicodemus today, holding the same questions in the sleeplessness of our darkest nights. Yet, what if we chose to hold fast to the faith that responds to our seeking? Jesus promises us that

the winds and waters of the Spirit will lead us toward our own new beginning. Each of us will experience renacimiento if we are to seek it.

Central is beginning its own Renacimiento. A new birth. A transformation. I close with this poem called "How Do We Begin Again?"

Do we slide into something new?

Do we make a formal announcement? Dearest reader, I have decided to begin again.

Do we turn gradually, a gentle yield, in a new direction or like a wave,

Do we crash onto the shore of a new day?

Do we grieve the change? Are there breadcrumbs on the path?

Will Nicodemus be there?

Will it ever be easy?

I'm not sure exactly how we begin again,
but I know that moths wrap themselves in silk,
and after quite some time,
after many long nights,
after days spent alone,
they break out of their shell.
They pull themselves out under open sky,
and they spend the rest of their days chasing the light.

Maybe it's always that way with beginnings.
Maybe it feels like the protective layer falling away.
Maybe we have to go it alone at first.
Maybe it feels like pulling and dragging yourself into something new.
Maybe there's always open sky at the other end.

I don't know Central's future, but I know who holds Central's future. It is the same God that led you away from the book Parent Roles, His and Hers, to inclusive language and a Female Senior Pastor. It is the same God who gave you a vision about building on this parking lot, who put a pause on it because it wasn't the right time. It is the same God that led through a pandemic to have us start this re-development discussion again. And it is this same God who decided that the person who should follow me was the same person who talked me into re-development in the middle of a pandemic and has been walking this journey with us for the past four years, Rev. Paul Perez.

So, I guess I would say that yes, we can begin again. Central continues to do that time and time again. And thanks be to God, who leads us on this journey! Amen.