

## “Perspective Reborn”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens  
based on the theme, “PERSPECTIVE REBORN”  
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.  
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### John 3: 1-17 NRSV

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.”

<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>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.”

<sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

<sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> 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.

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**S**ometimes you just need a new perspective, right? You get kind of bored, or burned out, or you have heard the same old things so often they don’t mean much. That can happen with a lot of things in life: your job, your relationships, even your recreational activities. You might need a new perspective to accomplish something you have been working at. As true as it is in

these other areas in can be true in your faith life as well.

This morning’s Scripture might be an example. It may be so familiar you have stopped thinking about it. This morning I want to offer you what may be a new perspective on this passage.

We’ve all probably heard those in the fundamentalist/literalist end of Christianity point to this as the ultimate

verse. They tout being “born again” as meaning everyone has to have a dramatic conversion experience and that the end result involves believing only certain things about Jesus. In many ways it sounds like this one verse becomes the complete measure of whether one is a true Christian or not.

Many of us on a more progressive end of Christianity may have difficulty relating to this concept. Probably many of us can not point to some dramatic turn around in our relationship with God. We may have experienced many times when we had to recommit to our relationship with God and the life of faith. Sometimes that may have come from either emotional experiences or intellectual reflections on God’s activity in our lives.

We also may have heard people use the verse, “for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” as a statement of exclusivity. They may never have noticed the very next verse, “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.” For many the perspective is that if you do not believe you will “perish” and will not “have eternal life.” In one way or another, these verses have been a touchstone for many in the Christian community. I want to invite you to hear them in what may be a new way, from perhaps a new perspective.

When we look at the Scripture passage, Nicodemus seemed to come to Jesus because he needed a new

perspective. He had heard of Jesus, he may have been uncertain what to believe about him, so he came to Jesus to gain a new perspective. John says he came at night, which in John’s gospel represents someone who is not “in the know.” It is the sign of someone who is “skulking around” as my mother used to say. I never exactly knew what “skulking” was but I knew it wasn’t good if you were doing it. Maybe he doesn’t want anyone to know he is there. Maybe he has been so busy during the day he couldn’t get an appointment with Jesus until after hours, who knows for sure?

What is ironic I think is that Nicodemus was a religious man. In fact, he was in many ways a “fundamentalist,” being a Pharisee. He was one who wanted to make sure everyone understood and obeyed the letter of the law. In their conversation, Jesus points out how anyone who is stuck in a literalistic understanding of God is missing the boat, they need a new perspective. Jesus challenges him to move from an earthly perspective to a heavenly, or spiritual, perspective. I believe this is a challenge to move from the literal to a more symbolic understanding of Jesus’ words.

Jesus invites Nicodemus to be reborn. Scholars have debated over the meaning of the Greek word. Some have pointed out that in Greek it has the connotation of being born “from above,” rather than “born again.” In any case Nicodemus is unable to understand because he takes Jesus literally. “How can I, an old man, climb back in my mother’s womb?” Jesus points out that

he is talking symbolically, metaphorically. Jesus points out very emphatically that there is a difference between talking about earthly things in a literal sense and heavenly things in a symbolic or spiritual sense. In order to understand what it means to be born again we cannot be stuck on literal explanations of Scripture, God, and the spiritual life because these are heavenly things that cannot be literally spoken in earthly ways.

Here's the other challenge to old perspectives that I think this story points out. We may always be thinking it is those "non-religious" folks or those folks of "other" religions that need to be converted, but Jesus and Nicodemus were of the same religion - they were both Jews. Jesus wasn't asking Nicodemus to convert to a new religion he was telling him to be reborn in his own faith. Maybe the real message here is for you and I. We are the religious folks – maybe you and I are the ones who need to listen when Jesus is inviting people to be reborn from above. It is an invitation to gain a new perspective on God and on ourselves. There is no shame in needing to update our viewpoint. None of us has the complete book on God – because even the book on God, the Bible, is always open to new understanding, insight, and truth. God is still speaking!

One writer makes the point that every system gets tradition-bound at times and needs to be "reborn" needs to gain a new perspective. Alfred Lord Tennyson makes that point when he says, *Our little systems have their day;*

*they have their day and cease to be;  
they are but broken lights of thee;  
and thou, O Lord, art more than they.*

God is bigger than our systems and even our religion. Our "religion" is our finite, human attempt to describe the infinite. Do you remember that drawing which depicted several blind men standing around an elephant touching it and trying to imagine what it is? That is a little bit of how religion, theology, doctrine and dogma stand when it comes to God. We are trying to make sense of, imagine, and articulate truth about something larger than we could ever imagine based on our limited experience, intelligence, and perspective.

The truth is we DO need a new perspective. We DO need to be born again, born anew, born from above in order to continually grow and overcome our limited human ability to understand God. We do get into spiritual ruts, we get off-track, we become confused. Life can throw so much at us that all the old beliefs seem unable to support the burdens we bear. At those moments we need to be willing to open our eyes to a new perspective. There is nothing sadder than a Christian who thinks that faith is a settled thing and they have to be afraid of questions, or thoughts that challenge traditional ways of thinking about God. One of the things we say in the United Church of Christ is that the creeds of the church are "testimonies of faith," not "tests of faith." What that means is that we understand them to be the historic expressions of the faith of those who were Christians before us. That does not make them "final." The words and

concepts must be re-examined and re-appropriated in every generation.

Another problem with fundamentalist usage of this passage that calls for a new perspective is the thinking that this sudden transformation of being “born again” happens completely at the moment one is converted. Can you be born again and never grow, never change, have everything complete any more than you could the first time you were born? It would seem to defy logic to be born again and that not be the beginning of a new set of growth experiences. Just as a newborn baby must grow and change, so must we as Christians who are reborn spiritually. In fact, that’s the good news!

If being born from above is the beginning of a new way of being, then I want to be born again, I need a new perspective, or perhaps I need my perspective to be reborn. God has made it possible for me and for you to continually be “rebooted” if you will forgive a change of metaphors. When my computer has locked up and become unusable and no other alternative gets it moving again we have to turn it off and turn it back on, we have to “reboot.” When you do the computer begins working again, you get a fresh start!

I have often confessed my need for a new perspective on technology and its uses in our age. I heard a story this week that has me rethinking my perspective a little. There is a church in Toronto that has a wonderful ministry to immigrants from a Middle Eastern nation that is predominantly Muslim. Recently, a woman who regularly attends began to

take out her cell phone during Sunday morning worship services. A number of people found this quite distracting, and, after some deliberation, the pastor decided that he needed to ask her not to use her cell phone during services. Upon meeting with her she assured him that she was not talking on her cell phone. Rather, she was holding the phone in such a way that her husband, who for work-related reasons had to move back to their home country, could listen to the service, particularly the sermon, over the telephone. He was a Muslim who was very interested in the new religious experience his wife was having, and he was excited to share in some of her experience, even though he was half-way around the planet. She told the pastor that sharing the church services via cell phone helped them to feel a sense of closeness despite their geographic separation. (By the way, the pastor gladly invited her to continue to use her cell phone during worship services.) Now, I have to admit this has me rethinking technology a little. In fact, I have been thinking about asking all of you to take out your phones and dial up a friend who doesn’t have a spiritual home and ask that person to listen to our service each Sunday until we can get them to come here in person. But there has to be an easier way, right? Still, you have to admit maybe there is hope that my perspective on technology can be reborn yet. AMEN.

David Buschart, “So Far, So Near,”  
[journeywithjesus.net/Essays](http://journeywithjesus.net/Essays), June 5, 2006.