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John 3:1-21  
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### The Terroir of our Faith

The other night at our men's bible study, we were discussing bourbon. And my friend Jacob brought up the idea that two bourbons, made with the exact same recipe, distilled with the exact same process, aged in the exact same oak barrels, but done in different locations would taste differently. Sometimes drastically different. Why? It's called terroir.

The noun terroir, pronounced TERR-WAR, NOT TERRIER...is a french term that comes from wine making. The terroir is the combination of factors including soil, climate, and sunlight that gives wine grapes their distinctive character. Expert sommeliers and wine makers are so good at knowing their wines that in just tasting or smelling a wine they can tell exactly where and how they were made...all because of their terroir influence.

So if someone were to try to pass off a cheap bottle of Costco wine for a \$558,000 bottle of Domaine de la Romanee-Conti Grand Cru 1945, they would immediately be able to tell you its a fake. Save your money and just go to Costco.

All because of the terroir.

Why all this talk about bourbon and wine making? Because today's scripture is all about the terroir of our faith and provides the combination of factors that give our Christian faith it's distinct character. Without these factors, one could quickly surmise that a person's faith, is no faith in Christ at all. It would be an imposter.

The context for our story takes place immediately after Jesus' bruh-ha-ha in the temple which we learned about last week. The "Jews" or Jewish religious authority was pretty distraught and demanded signs to prove that Jesus had the authority to say and do the things he did. When he would not, they decided it was time to get rid of him once and for all.

But there was one man, named Nicodemus, a Pharisee from the Jewish ruling council, who thought that maybe there was more to Jesus than what people took at face value. So he decided to go and find out more for himself.

Turn with me to John 3:1-21 and we hear about Nicodemus' interaction with Jesus.

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus. He was one of the Jewish rulers.  
**2** He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. We know that God is with you. If he weren't, you couldn't do the signs you are doing."

**3** Jesus replied, “What I’m about to tell you is true. No one can see God’s kingdom unless they are born again.”

**4** “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “They can’t go back inside their mother! They can’t be born a second time!”

**5** Jesus answered, “What I’m about to tell you is true. No one can enter God’s kingdom unless they are born with water and the Holy Spirit. **6** People give birth to people. But the Spirit gives birth to spirit. **7** You should not be surprised when I say, ‘You must all be born again.’ **8** The wind blows where it wants to. You hear the sound it makes. But you can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going. It is the same with everyone who is born with the Spirit.”

**9** “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

**10** “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus. “Don’t you understand these things? **11** What I’m about to tell you is true. We speak about what we know. We are witnesses about what we have seen. But still you people do not accept what we say. **12** I have spoken to you about earthly things, and you do not believe. So how will you believe if I speak about heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven. He is the Son of Man. **14** Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. In the same way, the Son of Man must also be lifted up. **15** Then everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

**16** God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life. **17** God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world. He sent his Son to save the world through him. **18** Anyone who believes in him is not judged. But anyone who does not believe is judged already. They have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. **19** Here is the judgment. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light. They loved darkness because what they did was evil. **20** Everyone who does evil deeds hates the light. They will not come into the light. They are afraid that what they do will be seen. **21** But anyone who lives by the truth comes into the light. They live by the truth with God’s help. They come into the light so that it will be easy to see their good deeds.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Before I wax eloquently through today’s sermon. A question for you...What is the most quoted verse in the New Testament that we occasionally see people wear on their t-shirts at football games? John 3:16.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever should believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

As we dive into this story with Jesus and Nicodemus, I want to explore several factors that form the terroir of our Christian faith. What is the difference between an intellectual faith verses a spiritual faith? What does it take to become

born again? What barriers do we often encounter? What does the imagery of Moses lifting up a snake in the desert have to do with Jesus' death on the cross? And finally what does this mean for us today?

Nicodemus was no dummy. He was a smart, learned man who had invested his entire life studying the Old Testament scriptures and how to follow God's law perfectly. That's what described a Pharisee. He was a teacher of the law and one who sat on the Sanhedrin which was the Jewish judicial and legislative ruling council. It was made up of local elites, scribes, lay leaders, and members of the high priestly family. In other words, people who had a significant stake in making sure that people followed the rules and didn't rock the boat.

We get this sense that Nicodemus approached Jesus on his own volition because he came under the shroud of darkness, so no-one else could see him. Other clues later in John's Gospel give hints that Nicodemus' searching was personal and sincere, not because he was sent by the Sanhedrin. Just prior to Jesus' arrest in John 7, Nicodemus defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin saying that a person should be heard before being judged.<sup>1</sup> And then finally in John 19 right after Jesus' death, Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea risked their lives in being associated with Jesus, asked Pilate for his body to give it a proper burial.<sup>2</sup> These are signs of Nicodemus' growing faithfulness, not betrayal.

Jesus knew Nicodemus' heart. Remember from last week, we heard that Jesus did not need human testimony, for he knew what was in a person. Jesus knew Nicodemus had the desire to know him more, but he lacked the courage to do it during the day for fear of what his peers might think.

Have you ever acted this way? Where you didn't do something because of peer pressure?

Notice how Jesus wasted no time to pin point Nicodemus' vulnerability.

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, no one, not even you, the most learned of Israel, can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

The Greek word that John uses for "see" comes from the root word "horao." It means to behold, perceive, or see. It seems to imply a different kind of seeing than with just one's physical eyes. It's a perceiving that comes from the heart.

I found it interesting that the Greek word used for "again," as in born again, comes from the root word "anothan." It means again, anew or from above. You see each brings a different nuance to Jesus' words to Nicodemus.

What I think Jesus was getting at and that John was playing around with in order to drive a theological point, was that Nicodemus, an intellectually enlightened person came to Jesus the light of the world in a state of spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> John 7:50-51

<sup>2</sup> John 19:39

darkness. Not only did Nicodemus hide under the darkness of night, but he hid behind his intellect and a darkened understanding of who God was and who Jesus was as God's Son.

What Nicodemus needed was a new set of eyes, spiritual eyes, that he could see Jesus for who he really was. The Son of God and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

He needed to be born again, in his thinking and his heart. Not through further study and human rationalization. But through faith, a sheer gift of grace from God above, through the Holy Spirit. Then he could really SEE Jesus.

So this begs the question, what does it take to be born again, anew, or from above?

Very simply, faith and trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. That's it!

And when we believe that, Jesus replaces our heart, our will, our knowledge, with His. It's a process that is both immediate and lifelong. And Jesus gives us his Holy Spirit to help us through the transformation process.

One commentator wrote, "It is not merely reformation, or amendment, or moral change, or outward alteration of life. It is a thorough change of heart, will, and character. It is a resurrection. It is a new creation. It is a passing from death to life. It is the implanting in our dead hearts of a new principle from above. It is the calling into existence of a new creation, with a new nature, new habits of life, new tastes, new desires, new appetites, new judgements, new opinions, new hopes, and new fears. All this, and nothing less than this is implied, when our Lord declares that we all need a 'new birth.'"<sup>3</sup>

The Apostle Paul who experienced this rebirth said, "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come." That certainly happened to Paul and it can happen to us today as well.

Do you want be reborn today? Just believe in Jesus!

I want to dive into the imagery of Moses lifting up a snake in the desert and what it has to do with Jesus on the cross. What Jesus was doing was making a connection with an Old Testament story which Nicodemus knew to something he would later encounter with Jesus.

In the Old Testament Book of Numbers, there is a story of how the Israelites grumbled against the Lord as they wandered through the wilderness. They cried out, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest what you have provided!"

So God sent venomous snakes to bite the people and many died. But God had compassion on them and told Moses to make a bronze snake which he could lift up

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<sup>3</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on The Gospel of John* (Abbotsford, WI: Anew Press, Life Sentence Publishing, 2019), 39.

on a stick. So that if anyone got bitten, they could look upon the bronze snake and live. It's a story that makes no rational sense at all, but took faith to believe.

Now if the Jews could believe this story, then perhaps they could believe in God's Son lifted high on the cross that if they looked upon I'm, he would save them from spiritual death and give them eternal life.

By the way, what is the symbol of modern medicine today? A snake on a stick. We still have no problems putting our faith in modern medicine when we are sick.

If Jesus tells us that no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless we are born again, then what are some common barriers to being reborn?

Sometimes it's our intelligence. Nicodemus was Israel's teacher, and yet he didn't understand spiritual things. Proverbs says "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, but in all of your ways acknowledge him and he will set your footpaths straight."<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes it's our sense of self-sufficiency. We live in a culture that doesn't think we need God. We can take care of ourselves. Pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and muscle on. Until we can't and our world falls apart and we must lean on the Lord.

Sometimes it's cultural. Hollywood certainly does not project the idea that it is cool to be a Christian these days. Instead it entices us to chase after the world and what it has to offer. Again Jesus said, "What good is it to gain the whole world, yet forfeit the soul?"<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes it's hypocrisy. We've certainly received mixed signals from some Christians today about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It's hardly his humble, self-sacrificial, loving.

Sometimes it's family. For some, this decision cannot be taken lightly. In some cultures, becoming a Christian means being kicked out of ones family, imprisonment, or death.

Sometimes it's the way we are wired. As for me and a two on the enneagram, I am always serving and doing things. So this idea of being born from above as a sheer gift of grace, apart from any works, is mind boggling.

Sometimes it's due to the hardships we've experienced in life and our hearts are just hardened and untrusting of a good God who is for us and not against us.<sup>6</sup>

And finally, sometimes it's fear. Maybe we are afraid of what following Jesus will cost us. Maybe we fear losing our status, our power, our money, our friends, or our influence. So instead of letting go and falling into the loving arms of Jesus, we

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<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 3:5-6

<sup>5</sup> Mark 8:36

<sup>6</sup> Romans 8:31

hold onto these things with a death grip, thinking they will save us...but they will not.

What barriers exist for you this morning? Could we trust God that if we took Jesus at his word and we offered these barriers up to Him, that we will not be condemned, but instead be invited to take that leap of faith to believe?

And finally what does this mean for us today?

Folks, Jesus knows our hearts. He knows what it is in us. He knows our struggles and our fears. He knows why we've come seeking Him today.

Jesus says, "Be born again."

Are we hiding behind our intelligence instead of wanting to know Jesus personally? We can know a lot about Jesus, but not know him as a friend.

Jesus says, "Be born anew."

Are we afraid to share our faith with family, friends, coworkers, or classmates because we don't want to be labeled as some religious nut who says one thing but then does another?

Jesus says, "Be born from above."

Are we struggling to make intellectual sense of what we are hearing is true?

Jesus says, "Trust my Holy Spirit and believe that I am the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world."

So what is the terror of our Christian faith?

That God loves us so much that He would stop at nothing to be with us. That Jesus willingly lifted himself on the cross so that we might not die from our sin but have eternal life. And that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ - and this is not from ourselves, our good works, or our intelligence, but is a sheer gift from God that we would never deserve.<sup>7</sup>

Drink in that!

Amen!

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<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9