

3/5/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

GOOD MORNING AND WELCOME!

It's good to gather – for worship, fellowship, to learn and be challenged, to hear God's words and sing God's praise! What are the announcements you have to share with one another this morning?

It's a privilege to welcome Warren Yoder here this morning – he's the newly minted Constituent Engagement person for Mennonite Church USA – in other words, he says, he's the "people person". Warren, please come and share a bit about yourself and your new job.

A new video has been produced by Mennonite Disaster Service about the Cabinet-making shop here in Goessel. Delbert is going to share with us a bit about the shop and then we'll see this new, 2-minute video.

Let's continue to gather ourselves together for worship by singing *Holy God, We Praise Thy Name*.

Our Call to Worship is printed in your bulletin.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Lord, we need new birth.

Paralyzed by doubts, dead in our stubbornness and guilt, walking in blindness, our hearts are hardened to your love.

We confess to the Lord . . .

(silent prayer)

Jesus, you have come to put the world right,
to give life to the dead,
and to call into existence a people born from above.

**All: Break in by your creating Spirit.
Send forth your fresh wind and open the way to real life, eternal life,
life that is transformed by your love. Amen.**

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Let's continue in prayer:

God of all creation,

Our help comes from you. When we are afraid, we can put our trust in the maker of the universe, the very pulse of life that is with us in every moment. You do not stay far from us or from the concerns of our daily life, but dwell with us and in all things.

Through Jesus, we know your power to transform all pain, brokenness, and death into new life.

God, we are keenly aware that we need new birth, birth from above. Our hearts are often hardened to your love. We doubt your presence and love in your lives, and we have trouble believing that your transforming power is at work in us.

Ignite our faith. Let us not simply go through the motions. All is well in this moment, because you permeate this moment, yet you are making all things new, and calling us to believe in new life for ourselves and our church and community.

You encompass every moment of life from birth to death. We pray for the family of Blake Schmucker as they grieve the loss of Blake's mother, Marge Schmucker. We ask for your comfort to surround Blake, Kris, Kara, Jordan, Nathaniel, and Lizzie in a special way.

We pray for those in our congregation grappling with new medical diagnoses or health issues without diagnoses with the uncertainty this creates.

We pray for those who feel lonely and as well as feeling the cold anxiety of grief, feeling the absence of that person who was dear, no matter how much time has passed.

We give thanks for the work of caregiving and spiritual guidance provided by our Deacons in our congregation, as well as other individuals with these gifts.

We give thanks for the energy and ideas of our Leadership Retreat yesterday. We pray for insight and energy as our church boards follow up in the coming months on the initiatives we discussed.

We pray that we can continue to be sensitive to the nudges of your Spirit as we grow into becoming a church marked by love for one another and neighbor as Jesus taught us.

We give thanks for youth ministry in our church and community. We pray for the Junior High students and Kevin and Bonnie as they shop for supplies for the New Hope Shelter in the coming week with donations from this past week's Midweek meal.

We also pray for the Community JH Ministry as they hold their fundraiser meal today and prepare for Camp 412 in May.

We pray that you will inspire leadership to continue this ministry in future years, as Laura and Michelle prepare to step back. We give thanks for the dedication they have offered over the past 7 years to this ministry.

O God, we are made in your image, and through the work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, you are restoring your image in each of us.

Our worth is found in receiving your love. Let that truth be born in us.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (ADAPTED FROM VT 1017)

God of Life and birth,

We give these offerings in gratitude,
rejoicing in the abundance of your gifts to us.

We give these offerings in faith,
trusting that you will provide for our needs.

We give these offerings in hope,
knowing you can use them to restore what is broken
and manifest your love in this world.

With these offerings, we give ourselves;
may we live with generous hearts and open hands.

SERMON – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

“Transformed in the Image of Jesus”

Nicodemus seemed like a good guy. He was a Pharisee, so we know that he was serious about his religious commitment. He was a leader in his community, so a well-respected man. He called Jesus “Rabbi, teacher.” And not just any teacher, but one who has come from God – “because”, he said, “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

He came to Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness, fearful, uncertain, confused. But he hadn’t yet asked Jesus any questions or posed any challenges when Jesus said to him, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above”, or born anew, or born again. The one Greek word that John used here and attributed to Jesus can have all of these meanings! And poor, confused Nicodemus was even MORE confused – possibly causing him to jump to the most literal, concrete, basic thing that he had heard Jesus say...which, of course didn’t make any sense! How can an adult, (someone who’s already old) go back into their mother’s womb and be born again?

Oh, Nicodemus! He was genuinely trying to understand. He had seen some of the signs and miracles, so he knew Jesus was different, and powerful, that he quoted the prophets and called out injustice. Nicodemus seemed to be drawn to Jesus and also confounded by him. Jesus was talking about the kingdom of God and Nicodemus, along with all of the Jewish people, was certainly looking and longing for a king! They had been waiting for a strong military leader who would throw off Rome’s heavy hand of oppression. But that didn’t seem to be what Jesus was talking about. And he also wasn’t talking about the current religious leaders getting automatic entry into the kingdom of God. Possibly quite the opposite! The kingdom of God as Jesus was describing it did not seem to be concerned with following the letter of the law, having wealth or status, or being able to recite doctrinal beliefs.

Jesus seemed to be saying that the kingdom of God is for those who believe in God (and in Jesus) and who are also willing to try to embrace the mystery of God, the aspects of God that

defy belief and depend on faith. Jesus seemed to be asking Nicodemus to release his need to try to explain and control God and simply to trust him.

For someone like Nicodemus, a wealthy man, a scholar, this would be like being reborn, like starting over with all of what he knew about life up to that point! Jesus was asking him to let go of his Pharisaical need to be right, to be certain, to be in a position of judging others. To be reborn would mean that Nicodemus would need to refocus, to reconsider his life as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin.

As a follower of Jesus, he could potentially still use his education and knowledge of the law, his gifts and accomplishments. But to enter the upside-down kingdom of God Nicodemus would need to humble himself, to open himself to the mysterious leading and guidance of the Spirit. It's like water or wind – cleansing and unpredictable by humans. Nicodemus would need to be open to new ways of learning, new ways of living, new ways of thinking, of trusting. Like Abram of old who left his home, his family, his country, all that was familiar to him, and followed God's Spirit to something brand new that he didn't understand or have an explanation for – that must have felt a bit like being reborn!

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of their shared history – the story of Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness. They had been trusting God through that ordeal, until they began to complain about the provisions. And then they began to be bitten by poisonous snakes. When there seemed to be no escape, they cried out and God heard their cry... again. God instructed Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and lift it up high on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten could look at that serpent and be healed. God made a way. It was a miraculous, mysterious and unexplainable way for them to experience God's love and salvation. Jesus recalls this ancient salvation story to describe how he himself will be lifted up, like the bronze serpent, for the salvation of the people. He was reminding Nicodemus that *this* is how the kingdom of God works. The Son of God who heals and restores, who turns water into wine, who takes meals in the homes of tax collectors and loves the unlovable back into being – this same Jesus of Nazareth who is speaking to you now is showing the world how God loves. And Nicodemus, you are invited to follow this example. But it's an impossible example to follow on your own. You'll have to be willing to lay down our pride, your need to be right, your need to control and explain the ways of God. It will be like being reborn and allowing God's Spirit to lead and guide your life.

And then we come to what is possibly the most well-known and most-often quoted verse in the Bible, John 3:16. Across the centuries, this verse has sometimes been boiled down to the simple question, "Are you born again?" Or it's been used to describe someone as a "born-again Christian". But sadly, the context of the whole story is lost when we ask just that one question. And, ironically, the question has sometimes become a sort of litmus test, a judgment for whether a person is in or out – saved or not.

Jesus was inviting Nicodemus – and all of us – to a whole different level of faith and life and trust in God. His invitation was anything but boiled down to a simple question. Jesus was inviting his followers to *join* him in creating the kingdom of God here, on earth, as it is in

heaven. He taught his disciples to pray for that, but he also taught us how to do it. And so we're invited to be born of the Spirit, to allow ourselves to be humbled so that we can be transformed into the image of Jesus and reflect the ways God loves the world.

I can hardly imagine a life more fulfilling, challenging, or literally life-giving than that! And it seems to me that being born again in the Spirit of Christ, being led and empowered by that same Holy Spirit and joining Jesus and other believers in co-creating the kingdom of God – that must surely be the beginning of eternal life. It's a process. It doesn't necessarily happen all at once, although sometimes there are specific experiences in which we can see God's Spirit leading us. We often see that in hindsight; not always in the midst of the experience.

God didn't send Jesus into this world to condemn it, but to offer salvation. Discipleship might begin with understanding and believing that God's upside-down kingdom is where our salvation lies. The kingdom in which the last are first, the rich are sent away empty and the hungry are filled, the meek inherit the earth and the peacemakers are called God's children. But this story of Nicodemus tells us that discipleship doesn't end with an intellectual understanding. It comes to fruition as we're able to put that belief into practice and to allow God's Spirit to lead us. May it be so. Amen.