

## 6/4/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

### WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB

A warm welcome to Alexanderwohl, where I hope you will find encouragement, fellowship, and strength for your faith journey.

Hopefully most of you are enjoying summer routines. You can see the decorations for our upcoming week of VBS.

Over the next months our worship services will use the same passages as the Sunday school curriculum that children through junior high have begun, entitled “Seeking peace together.”

The gospel incorporates multiple dimensions of peace: peace with God, peace within, peace with others, and peace with creation. While peace may not be the first word we think of, we will contemplate the late-night conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. Jesus teaches that peace in our relationship with God comes as we are born from above, born of the Spirit.

### CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Jesus says we must be born from above.

**People: God promises to give us a new heart!**

Leader: Jesus says we must be born of the Spirit.

**People: God promises to give us a new spirit!**

Leader: Jesus says that God loves the world,

**People: that God desires to save the world.**

Leader: So we come now to worship our God,

**All: For we are God’s people.**

### MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

You are the God of creation! The God who has imagined all things into being and provided all that is needed for creation to flourish and grow. You set the stars and planets in the heavens and put them on their courses. We praise you, Creator God and we give you thanks!

We thank you for the rain that has come in the last few days to water the earth and wash things clean. We thank you for the sunshine that, in combination with the rain brings growth and new life.

Thank you God, for the ways you have created the earth and all creatures to heal from injury and hurt. Some healing comes slowly and some more quickly, but we acknowledge that no healing comes without pain. For those who have physical pain or illness, we pray for relief and recovery. We think of Margie and ask that you be with her and the doctors. We continue to pray for Vernon Base as he continues to heal and we thank you God for healing he has already had. In these moments we bring to mind others who are struggling with ailments or illnesses...

(silence)

For those whose pain and healing involves the loss of loved ones, we pray. Especially for Vickie Hiebert and her family as they grieve the loss of Maxine. In these moments we call to mind prayers for ourselves and others we know who struggle in the healing process of grief and loss... (silence)

We pray for those whose hurt and healing involves brokenness in relationships. We ask for wisdom and humility, for perseverance and clarity. In these moments we pray for ourselves and those we know who long for healing in mind and spirit...(silence) God, we pray for your Spirit of healing and wholeness to be present and working in each of these situations.

We pray for our world – for places where war is raging and violence and fear have taken over. We pray for your light to shine into those dark places, for your Spirit to lead and comfort and save. Work through your people to bring what is needed.

We pray for our nation – for those who are making decisions and for those who then have to live with the decisions made. May your Spirit of compassion and care be present with our leaders and within us as we live out your love.

We pray for our state and our community – for those who have enough and for those who live in need. May your Spirit of generosity and attentiveness be present as we answer your call to look and live beyond ourselves.

We pray for our church – for those who are here, right now, doing the work of the church and for those who came before from whom we learn and on whose shoulders we move ahead. May your Spirit of faithfulness lead and direct us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Grant us, God, the grace of giving with a spirit large and free.  
That ourselves and all our living we may offer unto thee.

#### BORN OF THE SPIRIT – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Here in Kansas, we have plenty of experience with the wind. When we moved here, I immediately noticed the hedge rows between rectangular sections of fields, an attempt to partially slow down the strong winds that sweep the plain in one direction and then another.

Occasionally, strong winds lift up so much dust that there's no more visibility than with a thick fog. Living here, I finally had a point of reference for imagining the dust storms of the dust bowl era.

I don't have any remarkable experience with wind, like sailing, or weathering the hurricane force winds. But hop on a bike and you know that you cannot ignore the wind. I can bike at nearly twice the speed with a good tail wind as opposed to trying to bike into the same wind.

It is invisible. You don't know where it comes from, even if you look at weather maps, yet you hear its sound and feel its movement.

John 3 is a well-known passage and contains one perhaps the most well-known verse of the Bible in verse 16. It might seem like there is little here that we haven't heard before. The passage fits in with major themes in the Gospel of John about the salvation found in Jesus.

Through deep trust in Jesus, we open ourselves to the wind of the Holy Spirit, and experience rebirth from this divine source. This is peace with our creator and foundational to wholistic peace in all its dimensions.

In this episode, Jesus has a long, in-depth conversation with the religious leader Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, which means that there would be risks to him if he dared talk to Jesus openly during the day when he could be seen.

There is a tense relationship between Jesus and the religious leaders, as we know well from the other Gospels. Yet Nicodemus begins the conversation with compliments:

“Rabbi” – a title of honor – “we know that you have come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that you do if God isn’t with them.”

So they begin a conversation in which each response from Jesus gets progressively longer, and Nicodemus’ questions become shorter. There are no quotation marks in early manuscripts, which means there is no good agreement how much of the discourse should be in red letters as words from the mouth of Jesus. For example, the most recent edition of the NIV understands Jesus’ speech to end at verse 15, and the Gospel writer’s own commentary begins with the famous John 3:16, “for God so loved the world...”

It isn’t going to matter much for this morning where the end quotation mark should be. This is not an antagonistic conversation, but Nicodemus has trouble understanding what Jesus is trying to say in spite of his status as a well-educated religious leader.

In understanding this passage, it is helpful to know that the phrase “born again” that is pretty popular actually has two meanings in Greek. “Born again” as in being born a second time, or “born from above.”

It’s a little bit like saying in English, “let’s take this from the top,” meaning, “go through the whole thing again.” The Gospel writer seems to be fond of these kind of word plays. In the next chapter, Jesus uses a phrase that means both “fresh water” and “living water.”

Nicodemus’ misunderstanding rests on the fact that he isn’t able to hear the phrase both ways. He hears it as “born again,” and takes that literally as physical birth.

How can a person enter their mother’s womb again to be born a second time? Children grow quickly. It does not take long at all for even a small newborn baby to reach a size unsustainable in the womb. Birth is unidirectional. There’s no going back to where you came from.

Jesus replies that unless someone is born from water and spirit, they can not enter into the kingdom of God. “Born from water” has always confused me. It could be referring to baptism, but may also be referring to physical birth, the first birth, which is always out of the water of the womb. The second birth is out of Spirit.

We have another word that has multiple meanings that John also plays with. Pneuma means wind, breath, or Spirit. Verse 8 reads, “the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound,

but you don't know where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Here again there is a word with a double-meaning. Wind and Spirit are the same word. Jesus points to the fact that we don't control the Spirit or produce the Spirit. We can feel the movement of the Spirit.

The Spirit is both outside us and within us. We can also think of the Spirit as that of God who lives in each of us – no matter what shame or inadequacy, guilt or brokenness we may carry, not only are we deeply loved, but we carry that of God within our being. We have to discover that and claim that.

As Jesus continues talking to a confused Nicodemus, he compares himself to the snake "lifted up" in the desert. This obscure reference is to the story from the Exodus narrative in which many Israelites suffer from snake bites as punishment for their complaining.

God tells Moses to create a bronze snake. Anyone with snake bites can look up at this bronze snake and be healed.

For commentator Gail O'Day, there is a direct link between life of Jesus exalted, lifted up, and offered on the cross, and the possibility of our being born "from above." "The offer of new life ... has only one source – Jesus' offer of his own life."

Taking the cross of Jesus into the equation of this picture of peace with God, means that this rebirth is far deeper than either a badge of honor, or even a personal conversion.

It is a leaving behind of self-protectedness, pursuit of personal advancement, status, wealth, safety, and power – not that those things are completely wrong – and releasing ourselves in paradoxical trust in the One who gave all and revealed life on the other side of every death.

Phrases like "believing in Jesus" or being "born again" have been oversimplified in Christian America, turned into tokens or badges. It's something to say to indicate that we are on the right team, and to feel good about ourselves, without fundamentally challenging our materialistic and disconnected lives.

The song *Jesusland* by Ben Folds critiques the superficiality and emptiness of Christian America imagining Jesus himself walking through "Jesusland," never being invited in, while seeing "crosses hanging high above the malls."

*Down the tracks*

*Beautiful McMansions on a hill*

*That overlook a highway*

*With riverboat casinos and you still*

*Have yet to see a soul*

*Town to town*

*Broadcast to each house, they drop your name*

*But no one knows your face*

*Billboards quoting things you'd never say  
You hang your head and pray for Jesusland.*

In the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus promises the life of the coming age to all who have a deep trust in the Jesus. This “believing in” or trust is much more than intellectually agreeing with a set of ideas, or claiming the name “Jesus” as a kind of badge.

The scriptural phrase “name of Jesus” doesn’t translate well into English or our modern categories. It’s not about the two-syllable word “Je-sus.” It’s about the character of this person – the spiritual pattern he lived out – the pattern of self-giving love and resurrection. This pattern has always been present in God’s world.

Contrary to the message many churches send, God has great love for us and for the world. God is not out to condemn anyone, but we condemn ourselves to lives of superficiality and emptiness when we think only of our own interests and protection, when we live only in the logic of our first birth.

We have been primed to think of “believing in Jesus” as something we do as individuals to “opt-in” to God’s salvation. But this ignores the fact that much of our sin and brokenness is collective; we are embedded into systems and culture that make us participants in injustice or at least unhealthy behavior.

This is what we were born into when we entered the world in our first physical birth. We may carry some individual responsibility, but we are not able to extricate ourselves from the brokenness of the world by our own effort.

If we are born again or born from above, we are born into a different kind of world – the kingdom of God. Life in the kingdom of God is shared life. It is available to us now – at least in part.

We enter together as we cultivate deep trust in the pattern that Jesus exemplified in his life. When we put up our sail to catch the invisible wind of the Spirit that comes from we-know-not-where. When we listen within our interior life, our spiritual life, and, amid plenty of tape reels of negativity, shame, blame, and self-pity, we also find the still-small voice of the Spirit of God within us.

The Spirit is there too, penetrating the most wounded and hidden recesses of our souls, changing us from within. Before (or at least at the same time) we seek peace with others and peace with creation, we must tend to the life of the Spirit.

May God inspire us, renew us, and stir in us, and fill us with love.

#### BENEDICTION

Go forth knowing that you are God’s people, living with holy hearts of flesh in this world that God so loves. Receive the blessing of abundant life that God offers to all who give their hearts.