



John 3:1-8
A Spirit-Filled Summer
Born of the Spirit

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This morning we start on a new adventure that will last through the end of summer – presuming that summer ever actually arrives and sticks around, that is. Maybe I should say this adventure will last through to Labor Day Weekend, whether summer shows up or not...Anyway, we're in a new adventure as we dive into a series on the Holy Spirit simply titled: A Spirit-Filled Summer.

Now, I need to start with a bit of a confession as I introduce the series. I've wanted to do a series on the Holy Spirit for quite some time – several years, in fact. But I'll be honest: this series scares me. I've put it off, delayed, procrastinated and come up with excuses for why I couldn't do it. But the fact is, there's really just one reason why I didn't want to do this series: It seemed too hard, because the Holy Spirit is so mysterious. The Spirit is not very grounded or tangible. And that is intimidating.

As many of you know, the Bible teaches us that God expresses himself in three persons/beings/entities: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though collectively they are often just referred to simply as "God." So God is singular, God is one...but expresses Himself as three. God the Father and God the Son we can get our minds around. They're described in relational language that we can all understand. Sometimes we have to get our thinking on those relationships straightened out a bit when it comes to God – not all of us have or had a loving father like our Heavenly Father is; some of us maybe never had a son or perhaps we did but he was the rebellious child in the family rather than the obedient one as Jesus is obedient to God the Father.

And of course we can relate to Jesus easiest because he became flesh like you and me, lived and walked the face of the earth, interacted with people, went to parties, rooted for the Seahawks, and so forth. So there's a really high degree of relatability to Him – though we can't forget that he's God in the flesh, was born in a manger, turned water into wine, walked on water, died on a cross and walked out of the tomb on the third day. So he's approachable, but he's also completely "other."

But with the Holy Spirit, it's completely different. Start with the name: Holy Spirit. **“Holy Spirit” is more of a title than a name like “Jesus” or a relationship like Father.** In fact, most Christians put the definitive article in front of it, so it's *“The Holy Spirit.”* I don't usually get addressed as “The Brian North.” If anyone ever does, then my reputation has preceded me and I either deny that that's my name, or I run for cover. (Just kidding.) But I do get addressed as, or introduced as, “The Pastor of Rose Hill Church.” That's a title, much like “The Holy Spirit” is a title.

And then the title itself is not easy to get our minds around, either. “Holy” just doesn't sound very approachable. **In fact, “holy” means “set apart.”** In the Christian faith, “holy” usually has a connotation of being set apart for God – “Keep the Sabbath holy,” “holy Bible,” “holy communion,” or “holy jeans.” Well, the last one usually is holey jeans...but holey jeans could be holy jeans, set apart for God. So “holy” tells us that the Spirit is set apart in this way, but maybe it also makes the Spirit seem less approachable or relatable right from the get-go.

And then it's the “Holy Spirit.” Not holy human, or holy flesh, or holy cow, or holy moley, or holy something else that we can understand and grasp and see...it's Holy *Spirit*. For a long time, the Holy Spirit was rendered in English as the Holy Ghost. That was a way of putting it in a term that seemed to grasp what the Spirit is, but did so in language that's maybe a little more familiar, a little “earthier”...but maybe isn't really all that helpful when it comes to approaching the Holy Spirit. We will get into the name of the Holy Spirit more as we go along in this series, so I won't go any deeper here in this introduction. The point is: on the surface, the Holy Spirit is perhaps the least approachable, and definitely the least understood, of our triune God.

So that's a big reason why this series is kind of a challenging one and why I had put it off for several years. But you know what? **Sometimes you just have to do stuff that's stretching and challenging because it's the right thing to do and because that's how we grow in faith.** God gives us those opportunities sometimes. And maybe we all need a good challenge right now, because, you know: the coronavirus, the isolation, the remote learning for our

kids/grandkids, remote working, the economy, and then the ginormous racial tension in our nation...maybe all of that just isn't enough of a challenge...so let's add this on, ok? Look: I planned it last summer (as I do with all of our series), and I'm trusting God's got something for us in this series that we need right now. So let's dive into the challenge of the Holy Spirit. It's gonna be awesome, so buckle up for the ride.

Today's passage is one of the most famous teachings we have on the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Why? Probably it was because Nicodemus doesn't want to be seen with Jesus. **Why wouldn't he want people to know he was meeting with Jesus? Because he was a Pharisee who was open to Jesus.** In fact, he was a member of the top Jewish religious council, called the Sanhedrin. Now, it's possible that Nicodemus came on behalf of the Sanhedrin to check out Jesus, to have a conversation with him about his theology. But members of the Sanhedrin, and other Pharisees as well, did that all the time out in broad daylight. If he was acting on behalf of the Sanhedrin, he didn't need to do it under the cover of darkness.

More logically: Nicodemus was genuinely interested in finding out more about Jesus. He was a seeker of spiritual truth, who came to Jesus with an open and honest inquisitiveness, but because of his position, he needed to do it a bit secretly. Perhaps, like him, you have genuine questions about Jesus, such as: Who is Jesus? What did Jesus stand for? What did Jesus teach about God? Why do Christians cling to His name? How can they believe that he was raised from the dead? Maybe you wonder about those things. You're in good company here.

So Nicodemus makes this statement to Jesus about knowing that Jesus is sent from God. It's not a question, but it is designed to elicit a response from Jesus. And Jesus says, **"Very truly I tell you no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3).** This is not the response that Nicodemus was expecting. It's an answer that essentially is saying that what people have seen thus far in Jesus is only a taste of what they will see in God's Kingdom. The signs and wonders they've seen thus far are only an indicator of God's Kingdom; they're a precursor. And God's Kingdom *can* be

seen...it *will* be seen. But there's a qualifier: You have to be born again.

Now for those of us who are familiar with this term, "born again," I want you to try and imagine that you are hearing this for the first time. Just take the phrase at face value: "You have to be born again." It sounds like Jesus has lost his marbles. Jesus frequently says things that are surprising, if not even humanly impossible. For instance, after a brief teaching on wealth where he tells a rich man to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and then follow him, the man goes away sad because he had great wealth. He couldn't do it. Jesus then continues the teaching with the disciples when he says, **"I tell you, it will be harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle"** (Mt. 19:23). The disciples are astonished at this and ask, "Who then can be saved?" And Jesus responds, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

His statement to Nicodemus that one must be born again in order to see the Kingdom of God has the same impact. It's a surprise, because it's humanly impossible. Just as a camel can't fit through the eye of a needle, you and I can't be physically born again. Nicodemus recognizes the impossibility of this and says so to Jesus.

Let's sit with Nicodemus' response for a moment and see if it can't teach us something about ourselves. Nicodemus is a leader of the Jewish faith. He is a man who is supposed to be about spiritual things. But even he, a religious leader, having just opened the conversation about Spiritual stuff with his comment about Jesus being from God: **Even Nicodemus is hemmed in by his own focus on the physical realm. He's locked into the "flesh." And occasionally (or maybe more often than that), we are as well.**

We may be open to God as Nicodemus is...we may be in relationship with God as Nicodemus is...we may even be some kind of a religious leader as Nicodemus is...and we too may get caught up in the flesh, caught up in the world, unable to understand what Jesus is saying to us, or unable to comprehend what God is doing and how He's moving. Hopefully our eyes get opened, and we are able to get on board with where the Spirit leads and is moving in our lives; but sometimes we are stuck on the flesh and worldly

thinking, just as Nicodemus is here.

But Nicodemus' response opens the door for Jesus to elaborate. **And in a nutshell, Jesus says it's not a physical thing, but a spiritual thing.** It's about being reborn spiritually. Now, more fully Jesus says we must be "born of water and of the Spirit." The "water" is clearly a reference to baptism. It was a practice in Judaism that carried over to the Christian faith. Then, and still, it is a sign of God's work in a person's life; a sign of being a new creation...of having a "new birth." But, while baptism is an important step, and any person who follows Jesus ought to be baptized if they haven't been...while that's important, it isn't the main thing. It's a *sign* of the main thing. The main thing is what God is doing in our lives, and the re-birth that the Spirit gives.

So it's a spiritual re-birth, with physical, here-and-now ramifications in addition to spiritual eternal ramifications. Like any other birth, it's a beginning. It's a start. But because we've already been born physically, it's like a second chance, a do-over, to live life differently, to live with God the Father, following Jesus, and by the movement of the Holy Spirit.

However, unlike a physical birth where a baby has no say in the matter (when born, parents, location, etc.): **With spiritual rebirth, there is an element of active participation by the one being born again.** And Nicodemus shows us this, as he is open to the possibility that God is doing something new in the world and in his life. For some people, this means being open to the possibility that God *is*. (Period.) Being open to the idea that God is real. That could be new. But for those who are already open to God, it's being open to God doing something unexpected – showing himself in a new way, or opening our heart and our eyes up to a new work he's doing. Nicodemus was open in that way here, and *he stayed open*.

For instance, later in John, in 7:50-52, Nicodemus defends Jesus from some of his fellow Pharisees who wanted to wrongly arrest Jesus. Here's what we read, after the Pharisees sent soldiers to arrest Jesus.

"Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked [the Pharisees], 'Does our law condemn a man without first

hearing him to find out what he has been doing?’ They replied, ‘Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee’” (John 7:50-52). So they were judging Jesus as guilty just by where he grew up – the region of Galilee, without looking to see where he was born – Bethlehem, which is spoken of having a prophet come from there. And Nicodemus, in spite of his power and position as a member of the Sanhedrin, and what he was therefore risking, is willing to stand up for Jesus and defend him in the face of the persecution that was mounting against him. No more staying in the shadows of the night, and he stayed *open* to the Spirit’s movement in His life.

But that’s not even the end of it. **After Jesus’ death, it was Nicodemus who, along with Joseph of Arimathea, took Jesus’ body from the authorities and gave it a proper burial in a tomb (John 19:39).** So Nicodemus was open to God’s Spirit all the way to the end. And while the Gospels don’t explicitly tell of Nicodemus’ being “born again” of water and of Spirit, John certainly paints a picture of him that is open to the Spirit’s leading.

And: **That’s the surprising way that the Spirit moves: A Pharisee can become a follower of Jesus.** Saul of – most of us know him as the apostle Paul, is another example of the Spirit moving in surprising ways. He was a member of the Sanhedrin as well, and he went from persecutor of Christians to professing faith in Jesus. None of this surprises Jesus, though. He said in his conversation with Nicodemus that the Spirit blows wherever it may, like the wind. We can’t contain it or predict where it’s going to go. The Spirit will surprise us and challenge and change us as we are born again and then follow the Spirit. We just have to be open to it, as the Spirit leads us to new birth.

Let me wrap this up with a true story that ties all of this together: **We see in the events of this story the surprising way that the Spirit moves, we see an openness – even if it’s reluctant at first – to God, we see that this new birth, though spiritual, transforms our earthly lives as well.** Roger Fredrikson is the author of a commentary on the Gospel of John that I read in preparation for today’s message, and he was a pastor for many years as well. In his commentary he tells of one guy named Mr. Nou who came to faith in Jesus in the church he pastored. Here’s what he writes about Mr. Nou, “What

a beautiful experience it was a few weeks ago to hear him share the meaning of the new life God had given him. In his ‘old life’ he had frequently beaten his wife and children, often neglecting them while he was ‘partying with other women’ as he put it...

“He finally gave in to one of his persistent friends who almost angered him by constantly urging him to come with him to church. At first, it was all a joke for Mr. Nou. **But then, in God’s mysterious way, he met the One to whom Nicodemus came at night. It was a radical, life-changing encounter, and Mr. Nou was ‘born again.’** He emptied the whiskey bottles in his home and began to treat his wife and children with new love and respect...he began to study the Scriptures at 5:00 each morning....His wife said, ‘I don’t have a different husband. I have a new one.’” It’s a good word for us husbands and fathers here on Father’s day to make sure we treat our families as the children of God that they are.

And then, he continued to stay open to the Spirit’s leading. Pastor Fredrikson writes that Mr. Nou became a “contagious evangelist...sharing the good news of what happened to him, and inviting them to church.” And here’s how he concludes the story: “When I spoke to him, commending him for this (his evangelism) he seemed surprised. ‘Isn’t that what all of us are supposed to be doing? How could anyone hold back such a good thing?’”ⁱ

Mr. Nou was finally open to God’s Spirit: He was open to being born again, and then he experienced it. He confessed his sin, repented of his wrong ways of living – even emptying the bottles that undoubtedly fueled much of his poor behavior – and turned to God. And it was a whole new life as the old was gone and the new had come...as the Spirit moved in unexpected ways, turning him into an evangelist for the Lord. Not only was his family transformed, but well over 100 people became a part of their church because Mr. Nou shared the good news of Jesus. And it all started because he got born again. Because the Holy Spirit moved powerfully in his life, he was open to that, and he responded. The Spirit turned him around 180 degrees. But it was completely unexpected. That’s how the Spirit operates.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is working on you so that you might be “born

again.” If you’ve never been “born of water and of the Spirit,” there’s no time like the present, and I encourage you to be open to the Spirit’s movement in your life. Or maybe you’ve already been born again but the Spirit is doing something new and maybe surprising right now, blowing where it will, and seeking to bring you along. Much like Nicodemus, a long-time believer in God who was open to the Holy Spirit: Are we open to the Spirit making us born again and moving like the wind in our life? I hope so – because as Jesus says, that is how we see the Kingdom of God. Let’s Pray...Amen.

ⁱ Roger Fredrikson, *The Preacher’s Commentary – John*; Comments on John 3:1-8.