

6/8/25 What if You Could Start Over? John 3:1-8; Romans 6:1-11
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Most golfers are familiar with the term, taking a “mulligan”. According to golf lore, David B. Mulligan was a Canadian golfer, who played at the Country Club of Montreal in the 1920s. One day, after hitting a bad tee shot, he immediately re-teed and hit another ball. He jokingly called it a "correction shot", and his friends liked the idea so much that they started calling it a "mulligan".

Have you ever wished you could take a “mulligan” and start something over? Most of us have things we wish we had a second chance to start over, to correct, to do differently — these can range from things as small as a golf shot, to how we handled a situation with a person, to important choices involving relationships or careers. In and through Christ, we can start over. We can wash our past sin away, be baptized and filled with the Spirit, and live a new life. Then, as a follower of Christ, every day is a chance to begin again.

The image and symbolism of water flows through the Gospel of John from beginning to end. In *John 1:26-28*, water appears in connection with John’s baptism and the Holy Spirit. In *John 2:6-7*, water is part of the Jewish rites of purification at a wedding. In *John 3:5*, Jesus connects baptism with water and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Today’s scripture focuses on a conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee, named Nicodemus, about entering the kingdom of God through a spiritual birth — what Jesus calls being “*born of water and the Spirit.*”

John 3:1-8 (NRSV) “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. **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.*’ Jesus answered him, ‘**Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.**’ 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?*’ Jesus answered, ‘**Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.** *What is born of the flesh is flesh, and **what is born of the Spirit is spirit.** Do not be astonished that I said to you, “**You must be born from above.**” **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.***”

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. This detail is both literal and symbolic; he didn't want other people to know he was visiting Jesus, so he met him under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus wasn't willing to be publicly associated with Jesus, which is something we do when we're baptized. He was also “in the dark” spiritually, not yet understanding who Jesus truly is.

Nicodemus also represents more than himself. He's a Pharisee, and a symbol of religious authority. He represents those in authority who refuse to believe in Jesus, throughout the Gospel of John. He speaks in plural terms, suggesting he's voicing the collective doubt, or confusion, of a whole group of people. He's an example of those who saw Jesus' signs, but whose faith was uncertain (*John 2:23–25; 3:2*).

Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can see or enter the kingdom of God unless they're born from above — of water and the Spirit. The water symbolizes baptism; the Spirit is the source of new life. While the use of water is assumed, Jesus emphasizes the Spirit's action. Baptism without the Spirit is incomplete. The New Testament shows that the relationship between baptism and the Spirit isn't uniform — in some cases, **people were touched by the Spirit before** becoming baptized (*Acts 10:44-48*); in others, the Spirit came **through the laying on of hands after baptism** (*Acts 19:5-6*); and in another, the Spirit was said to **come in and through baptism** (*1 Corinthians 12:12-13*).

Despite the varieties of ways God gives the Spirit to individuals, the consistent truth is this: **we need a new birth — a spiritual rebirth — through faith in Christ.** Being “born from above” means coming to faith in Jesus, who, John says, is the One who came from heaven to give life to the world. **Faith is the form that new birth takes** (*John 3:12, 15, 16, 18, 36*). The anchor point for faith, and new birth, is **the cross**, for Jesus' death expresses God's love and offers new life to all who believe (*John 3:14–16*).

Lee Strobel shared this baptism story: “Before being baptized, we invited people to write down a few of their sins, fold the paper, and pin it to a wooden cross — symbolizing how our sins are nailed with Christ and forgiven. One woman wrote a letter afterward and said in part: ‘I was terrified. But as I pinned it to the cross, and came to

the pastor to be baptized, I felt like God was saying, “I love you. You’re forgiven.” For the first time, I truly felt God’s unconditional love.”

Do you carry guilt or shame you’ve kept secret? Jesus wants to lift that weight. He wants to forgive, to heal, to set you free.

God’s gracious initiative to us always precedes our response. Baptism is a symbolic representation of something already done for us by God. What occurs at baptism symbolizes an inner change and a true commitment to live a life devoted to Christ. Jesus says to Nicodemus and the people he represents,

“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You (people) must be born from above.’ 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 born of the Spirit.”

God is like the wind that blows where it pleases and chooses. The wind makes things happen. God makes things happen, and the Lord is close to us when we’re baptized. Sometimes, people feel differently after being baptized, others do not necessarily — other than being wet.

Being “born of water and the Spirit” doesn’t always happen in the same way. Some people have dramatic conversions; others come to faith more gradually. In John’s Gospel, the key issue isn’t the nature of your experience — it’s whether you believe. Baptism was a common practice among Jews and early Christians, but what made Christian baptism unique was the belief that God’s Spirit was present and active through Jesus. Christian baptism was always regarded as a rite of initiation into life in Christ and the church.

Christ can save folks without them being baptized at all, as he did the penitent thief on the cross next to him. Baptism is not necessary to salvation, but it demonstrates our public commitment to Jesus and to discipleship within the church. Some people can resist baptism, or any public expression of faith that reveals to others that they’re a follower of Christ. Resistance can come from a strong sense of individualism that doesn’t want to acknowledge a need for God or for anyone else. Other people fear the judgment of people in their lives, and some simply distrust institutions like the church. Overcoming our fears, much as Nicodemus had to do, is a key step in trusting Jesus and being baptized.

At Brewster Baptist, we baptize by immersion, meaning we take you completely under the water, because it symbolizes dying and rising with Christ — a visible picture of *Romans 6: “Buried with him in baptism... raised to walk in newness of life.”* Baptism is about affirming your faith and commitment to following Jesus. We do a renewal of baptism by immersion, for adults who were baptized as infants, who wish to confirm what was done for them and who choose to make a public profession of their commitment to Christ. We can do baptisms here at church any time, if you’re interested, and we’re going to do baptisms in Cape Cod Bay on August 17th.

When people have asked me why I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and why I was baptized, I reply that the change in the disciples’ behavior is the greatest argument that Jesus, indeed, rose from the dead. There was a radical change in the followers of Jesus — from the time of Jesus’ crucifixion and its immediate aftermath, to Jesus’ resurrection and his repeated appearances to the disciples, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, which is today. Before, they had been cowering behind closed doors and living in fear; their leader had been killed, and they felt the pressure of being part of an unpopular movement. On the day of Pentecost, however, they were spilling into the streets, proclaiming the works of God without shame and without fear. What made the difference? An experience with the risen Lord, and the power of God that is given to every believer by the Holy Spirit.

One of the things many of us look forward to and enjoy, for two months of the summer, is the Cape Cod Baseball League. Some of us are, or have been, Host Families for players, and the players are arriving right now from all over the country. I was texting yesterday with Marty, who stayed with us in the summer of 2017, and helped the Brewster Whitecaps win the championship that season. Each player comes to play for a team, and will wear the uniform of that club, so everyone knows the team he plays for. He’ll get to know his teammates, and seek to play his position to the best of his ability to help his team win and be successful. In a sense, when we’re baptized, we do the same thing. We’re showing the world whose team we’re on in the game of life — we’re playing for Jesus’ team. Our task is to get to know our teammates in the church, to play the role God has given us the ability to play, to the best of our ability — whether as a Sunday School teacher, Media Booth Volunteer, as a member of Buildings and Grounds, Safety and Security, in Worship, whatever that position may be — to help our team win and be

successful. It's also the job of all of us to talk about our team and to recruit more people to be a part of it.

Peter's sermon in *Acts 2* describes what God had done in fulfilling Joel's prophecy that we heard earlier, and in Christ's life, teaching, crucifixion, resurrection, and in the coming of the Holy Spirit. Then, beginning at verse 37, we hear the result of his message. "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, *'Brothers, what should we do?'* Peter said to them, ***'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'*** And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, *'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'* So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added."

We can start over, not because of our power or ability, but because of God's Spirit moving in us as we respond to Christ. Nicodemus, who first appears in *John 3* visiting Jesus at night, is heard from again in ***John 7:50-51***, "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, *'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?'*" In defending Jesus in this way, he is rebuked by other members of the ruling council. In ***John 19:39***, after Jesus died on the cross, at great risk to his reputation, position, and safety, we read, *"Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds"* to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus eventually *does* take a public stand for Jesus — demonstrating the journey from nighttime hesitation to bold faith, a journey John hopes we'll all take.

The first church Jill and I served was Prospect Hill Baptist Church in Prospect Park, Pennsylvania. I went over early one Sunday morning, before worship, to fill the baptistery, which was located under the platform. This involved going downstairs to the basement of the church and turning a bunch of valves to cause the water to flow and circulate properly. I had done it before, and I knew how many hours it took for the water to fill the tank. I went home, had breakfast, and got set for worship. When I returned to the church, I opened the front door, and I could see the platform — and there was light

reflecting off the top of the platform because the water was just about to spill out all over the carpeted platform and carpeted floor. I dropped my Bible and belongings and sprinted straight, turned right to go downstairs, leaped the eight stairs to the landing, and then leaped to the floor. The only problem was, I forgot about the overhang. I hit it with my head, and the next thing I knew, I was lying flat on my back on the floor looking up at the ceiling. Fortunately, I was in my twenties — and have ancestors from the Calabria region of southern Italy, which means “hard heads” — so I jumped up and ran down the hall and turned off the water. That day, I baptized people with a big mark across my forehead.

In a less painful way, that’s what happens when we’re baptized; we’re Marked, Initiated, Chosen, Embraced, Washed, Adopted, Gifted, and Reborn as a child of God. It marks a new start in our life, and tells the world whose team we’re on. If you aren’t already, I invite you to prayerfully consider joining Jesus’ team, so you may be forgiven, embraced, and empowered to live as a beloved child of God.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. **Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, possibly out of fear or confusion.**
What might keep people today from openly seeking Jesus or asking spiritual questions? Have you ever had a “nighttime” moment, like Nicodemus — spiritually curious, but hesitant to be seen?
2. **Jesus talks about being “born of water and Spirit”.** What do you think it means to be “born from above”? How is that different from simply being religious or doing good things?
3. **Romans 6:4 says we are “buried with Christ through baptism... so that we may walk in newness of life.”** Have you experienced moments in life when you felt like you truly got to start over with God? What triggered that transformation?
4. **The sermon shared the story of a woman who felt deep fear and guilt about her sin before baptism, but also deep love and forgiveness.**
What role does confession and vulnerability play in spiritual rebirth or renewal? Why is it so hard — and yet so powerful — to bring secret things into the light?
5. **Baptism is a visible sign of an invisible transformation.** What does your own baptism (or thoughts about baptism) mean to you, personally? Was it just a ritual, or did it carry deep significance?
6. **Jesus says the Spirit moves like the wind — unpredictable, unseen, yet powerful.** Where do you see the Spirit at work in your life, or in our world today? Are there places you're resisting the Spirit's movement — or open to it?
7. **The message reminds us that baptism is not the end, but the beginning, of a lifelong journey of discipleship.** What does “new life” in Christ look like for you, right now? What's one area where you feel called to grow, change, or recommit?

Romans 6:11 – “Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”