

John 3:1-17: Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe; how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Lt. Gen Victor Krulak, USMC (ret.), wrote in his book *“First to Fight”*, “The entire Marine recruit training process is dedicated to developing brotherhood, interdependence, and determination to triumph. Marines like to say that it is this almost apostolic approach that sets the Marines apart... or as they say at Parris Island, *“This is where the difference begins.”* For the young man who aspires to become a member of the Marine fraternity, *initiation starts with a reduction of all to a common denominator.* Stripped naked in a group for a physical examination, they are bathed together, their heads clipped, civilian clothing and jewelry removed, *all dressed exactly the same.* After this egoectomy, they start from an initial zero and they are rebuilt from there.”¹

They start from zero and are rebuilt; a similar process takes place at Great Lakes with the Navy, at Fort Jackson in the Army, at Cape May with the Coast Guard, and somewhere in TX where there’s a golf course and a runway... joking... I love the Air Force...

Whenever one enters the military- the individual is broken down, the individual is built back up, and the individual becomes part of a team. The old life is gone, the new life has begun.

During Lent, we Christians pause to repent of our old life and strive for the new life in Christ. We hope to rewrite, with God’s help, our story, to sing a new song. To get on the same

¹Victor Krulak, Lt. Gen, USMC (ret.), *“First to Fight”*, Naval Institute Press, p. 161

page of sheet music if you will, with one another as the body of Christ, and with God as the great conductor.

The text of John 3 is rich, with multiple levels and meanings throughout. It starts with vv. 1-10 where Jesus is having a conversation with Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes at night and he does not understand what Jesus is saying, even though Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel. He starts by saying that we know you are from God because no one can do these things apart from God. Nicodemus knows the story, he knows the song, but is he on the same page of music?

Jesus' response was that no one, unless he is "another", can see the Kingdom of God. Some texts translate another as "*born again*" while others translate it as "*born from above*". Both are right and the problem arises when you choose one and thus forsake the other. Remember our boot camp analogy? You can't become a Marine by simply wearing the uniform and getting a high and tight haircut. You must complete ALL training. You are broken down and must be built back up. It's like taking off our civilian clothes and putting on the uniform, we take off our old clothes and put on Christ. Nicodemus is confused because he is thinking in terms of being born a second time from a womb. Jesus tells him that he is thinking of earthly things, not heavenly things. Nicodemus is thinking of the flesh while Jesus is talking about the Spirit. Jesus is looking for a few good recruits who have been *born again* AND *born from above*.

Jesus explains this in his discourse in vv. 11-17, he says we speak of what we *know and see*. But we need both, born again *and* born from above, "**in order that those who believe in him may have eternal life.**" The Son was lifted up as a sign, to be exalted. One way of looking at it is this way: "To be born *from above* is to be born *again* through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross" ... We repent of our old life and strive for the new life in Christ. This is our story; this is our song. "...If one believes, one's present state is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes. Christology and Anthropology (the study of Christ and study of mankind) are thus inseparably linked in the Fourth Gospel. Nicodemus did not believe; therefore, he remains in the darkness. He came to Jesus at night and will stay in the night."² Nicodemus doesn't understand because he is on a different page of music. He hears the harmony and the melody, the notes of the gospel are ringing, but he can't make sense of them. He is not in step; he is not in tune.

When we marched in boot camp, someone always called out cadence. Think of it like a song to march to, or music that gets us on the same page. "Many cadences have a call and response structure of which one soldier initiates a line, and the remaining soldiers complete it, thus instilling teamwork and camaraderie. The cadence calls move to the beat and rhythm for the speed of the corresponding march. This serves the purpose of keeping soldiers "dressed", moving in step as a unit and in formation, while maintaining the correct beat or cadence."³

That cadence, that song, kept us working and looking like a team. It kept us in step (and most of the time kept the Drill Instructors off our backs). What does that look like for us in this context? We don't trounce around Lynchburg marching in formation, as a church that would just be odd.

If we want to be on the same page, singing the same song, then let us first understand the music. What makes up a song? The verse, chorus and bridge are the main parts...

² New Interpreter's Bible Commentary

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_cadence

But what are the other parts? We know there are notes- like musical syllables that speak to a tune, there is the combo of pitch and rhythm which we call melody, and harmony- the background music.

Are we on the right note and the same pitch with one another and following Christ as choirmaster? Or are we individuals singing our own tune?

Think of the other parts of a song as well, there's the **Verse**. Arguably the most elemental part of a song, the verse is where the song's story—whether it's lyrical or instrumental—begins to unfold. In today's passage, John is unfolding the verses that tell us what is necessary for eternal life. To be anothén, born again and born from above.

Refrain or chorus. ... the lines that are repeated in music or poetry. This is our story; this is our song. To repent, to praise and to give thanks to our Savior, all the day long.

Don't forget the **Hook**. A musical idea, often a short riff, or phrase, that is used to “catch the ear of the listener”. What are the hooks that catch your ear nowadays? (PAUSE)

And finally **Rest**, that pause between the notes. Rest is important. In music and in life.

Music in worship, in the song of our life, helps us with a *reduction of all to a common denominator*. We hope to rewrite, with God's help, our story, to sing a new song. This can't be my own song, or your own song, nor even our own playlist, but to be renewed in Christ and sing His song, to get caught by his Hook, and to repeat the refrain until it becomes a part of our very being.

John Calvin explains it this way, “departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind (clothes, hairstyle, attitudes, behavior) we put on a new.”⁴ In the same way, we go into the church as sinners, born again into a life of renewal, living by the grace of God and the fruits of the Spirit, while receiving forgiveness of sins. We are still sinners, but now we are saints who keep on trying, and God calls us together in this effort. Calvin says, “when anyone has been brought into a true knowledge of sin, he then begins truly to hate and abhor sin; then he is heartily displeased with himself, he confesses himself miserable and lost and wishes to be another man.” This is the early stage of dying to the old self- the recognition that one needs to be “*born again*”.

“When a man is laid low by the consciousness of sin and stricken by the fear of God, and afterward looks to the goodness of God- to his mercy, grace, salvation, which is through Christ- he raises himself up, he takes heart, he recovers courage, and as it were, returns from death to life”. He is *born from above* as he is lifted in the assurance of Christ; Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine. This is our story; this is our song!

Paul addresses this in Ephesians, “**be made new in the attitude of your minds; and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.**” and Colossians, “**taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.**” This renewal, this birth, does not take place in a day or weeks or months, but through continual and sometimes even slow advances- just like training a recruit takes time, just like learning a new instrument or piece of music, takes time. “Christ's purpose is only to teach that all who aspire to the Kingdom of Heaven must put off their old nature.”

⁴ The Institutes of the Christian Religion, p. 597

Part of me wonders if there are those on the radio or gathered here in the sanctuary for whom the military metaphor doesn't make sense or is not relatable. Or perhaps, like me, music is not your forte. In closing I leave you with the following in hopes that it resonates in some way, to relate what was spoken in John's gospel so many years ago, to what we are faced with today.

"Once there was a brier growing in a ditch and there came along a gardener with his spade. As he dug around it and *lifted it up*, the brier said to itself, "What is he doing? Doesn't he know I am a worthless brier?" But the gardener took it into his garden and planted it amid his flowers, while the brier said, "What a mistake he has made planting me among these beautiful roses." Then the gardener came once more and made a slit in the brier with his sharp knife. He grafted it with a rose and when summer came, lovely roses were blooming on that old brier. Then the gardener said, "*Your beauty is not due to what came out, but to what I put in.*"⁵

During this lent, during this year, and during our lives. May God put his song in our hearts. May God renew our hearts and minds to sing with joy, the cadence of Christ. This is our story; this is our song. Praising our Savior all the day long.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

⁵ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/r/regeneration.htm>