

Chris Murphy  
Feb. 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
John 3: 1-8  
Sermon Title: The Rebirthing of God

Prayer...

Introduction:

Welcome to the Lenten Season, a time for spiritual formation over the next 40 days as we prepare for the gift of the resurrection-Easter Sunday.

This year during Lent we are exploring together the book “The Rebirthing of God” by John Philip Newell. Newell writes about Celtic Christian Spirituality, which highlights the goodness and beauty of creation, including ourselves.

In The Rebirthing of God, John Philip Newell invites us to explore how Christianity is experiencing new beginnings. Much of traditional Christianity is declining, but according to Newell a rebirth of Christianity is possible.

To help describe a new approach of Christianity that potentially might flourish in our age, Newell in his book takes us to the Island of Iona, which is a famous pilgrimage site of the coast of Scotland that was originally inhabited by Saint Columba in 563 AD. Newell himself lived with his family on the island for a few years when he was warden of Iona Abbey. He continues to take groups on pilgrimage to Iona each year.

Karen and I went on a 10-day pilgrimage through Scotland in 2006 when we were in our thirties. One of our favorite parts of the pilgrimage was visiting the Holy Island of Iona. This island, which is three miles long and one mile wider felt like a thin place, a site where heaven feels very close to earth, where God's presence is known in a special way because holy people have prayed on this island and sought God for centuries. It was an amazing experience for us to visit Iona. Here are a couple of photos of us when we were there. We were so young. This was a year before Cate was born.

Little did we know that about a decade after this trip Karen and I would join the community of Newberg First Presbyterian Church. Little did we know that we would be invited to help lead this community into a deeper exploration of Celtic Spirituality, which is what we will learn about together once again this Lent. By the way, the Celtic cross that we see in front of our sanctuary was a gift to our church on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1957 by J. Wyly Clark and his family in loving memory of his parents Mr. and Mrs. C.H. Clark. The cross is dedicated as a reminder of Christ's death for our sake. It is a replica of an 8<sup>th</sup> century cross that has its remain in the Iona Abbey. It is called St. John's cross and a large replica of this cross made of concrete stand in from of the Iona Abbey today. To me having this Iona Celtic Cross in our sanctuary is one sign that I am in the right place as the pastor of this church. Without sounding too prophetic, I wonder if God has sovereignly planned for this church to embrace Celtic Spirituality and to share the wisdom of this approach towards Christianity to our wider community here in Newberg and the wider world. Certainly, our

new Newberg Peace Garden on our church property resonates well with Celtic Christianity and Ciaran Hynes brings his own Celtic roots as a native of Ireland. By the way Saint Colomba who founded the Christian monastic community on Iona was originally from Ireland.

For this first sermon on Lent, I want to highlight some of what John Philip Newell says in the introduction of his book. He suggests that Christianity is experiencing a seismic collapse.

Much of mainline Christianity is in decline because it is struggling to be reborn.

Newell references our Scripture text this morning from John 3. Just as Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again, so Christianity today needs to be reborn and to imagine God's heart in new ways.

Here are a few of Newell's words from his introduction to our book related to being reborn. Newell writes,

“In St. John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of the need to be “born anew” (John 3:7). This phrase, more familiarly rendered as “born again”, has been hijacked by religious fundamentalism to give the impression that we need to become something other than ourselves. The phrase has been applied so often to preach a turning from what is deepest within us and a denial of our human nature that many in the Christian house-hold understandably have recoiled from its use. But the phrase needs to be reclaimed. It is close to the heart of Jesus’s teachings and points to the necessity of what is at the heart of all things-made of God-being set free to emerge in radically new ways. The Rebirthing of God is precisely this. It is pointing to a radical reemergence of the Divine from deep within us. We do not have to create it. We cannot create it. But we can let it spring forth and be reborn in our lives. We can be part of midwifing new holy births in the world.”

For Christianity to be experience a rebirthing for our times, Newell suggests that reconnection needs to happen with important

spiritual values. There is a need for reconnecting with the earth, reconnecting with the light, reconnection with compassion, reconnecting with spiritual practices, and reconnecting with love.

I wonder if you agree with John Philip Newell's assessment that traditional Christianity in many ways is collapsing and needs to be reborn. I wonder if you agree that a fresh understanding and relational connection with God is needed. If you do agree that Christianity needs to be reborn, what do you think needs to change?

What needs to change within our Christian faith? In your own life, what do you desire to change about your own experience of God?

For me, I long to be a person who experiences even more deeply God's love, love for myself, and love for others. I desire to live more in the present moment and to enjoy the fullness of life. I want to be slow to anger and quick to listen and show compassion. I wish to be a peacemaker and bridge builder. These are a few dreams for my own faith.

I also desire a Christianity that is courageous but not violent. I long for a Christianity that sees the light of Christ in all creation including all of humanity. I long for a Christianity that is intercultural and multiethnic and that honors the sacred feminine in God equally with the sacred masculine. I desire to see more fully a Christianity that contributes to peace and love in the world and that is defined more by love than judgement of others. I want Christianity to be in solidarity with the disadvantaged and oppressed while also challenging the forces of evil through the power of love. I want a rebirth also of the power of God and her angels through the sign of miracles of healing and transformed lives and communities. I want a Christian community that is dedicated to prayer and mission. What I really want is a Christianity that looks like Jesus?

Friends, welcome to the season of Lent, where we give ourselves permission to dream big and to take a close look at our lives and at the Christian faith. Prepare for some fun as we explore together

Celtic Christianity through the insights of Scripture and the insights of John Philip Newell in his book the Rebirthing of God.

My hope is that this Lenten season will feel like a holy pilgrimage for you, a journey into greater wholeness and greater expectation for God to grow us into her likeness. Are you excited? My hope is that we might have the same curiosity of Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night so that he might see the light of Christ in his life.

If we are to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit today, we need to come before God with a posture of humility and a willingness to see the woundedness and sin in our own lives and in the Christian church. Lent is an invitation to be reborn and renewed by the Holy Spirit. I heard Lent described recently as a good meal that nourishes our body with healthy food. Friends welcome to the feast of Lent.

One other reminder about this season that I also shared at our Ash Wednesday service. Lent is a safe season of the church where you can express lament. Lament is the feeling of deep



sadness. If you are like me, you might struggle to give yourself permission to be sad. I often feel like I need to happy, happy, happy- Mr. Positive. I try to be hopeful so that others are hopeful and I do have hope, but I also see that in our world there is much suffering and sometimes we need let the sadness sink in, so that we can release our emotions to God in prayer. The sadness of lament is different than the paralysis of depression. Lament is a releasing of our pain to God in a cathartic way that leads to a life a greater freedom and compassion. So take time to lament even as you also take time in the season of lent to rest in God's gracious love for you and for the world.

As we journey together consider reading our book *The Rebirthing of God* and seeing how Jesus might meet you through the wisdom of Celtic Spirituality.

AMEN.

John 3:1-8

### Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus[a] 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 unless God is with that person.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4 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?” 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You[c] must be born from above.’ 8 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.”