At Judson University I spend a lot of time teaching courses on *Introduction to the New Testament*. And it’s usually about this time of year when we have finished working through Matthew, Mark, and Luke that I have the opportunity to talk about the Gospel of John— one of my favorite books of the New Testament. And since we are moving at such a brisk pace, I have found the best way to get acquainted with John rapidly is to focus on his differences and distinctives.

I typically start off by writing two words on the board: Maverick(y) and Irony. Then I asked students to tell me what these words mean. About this time of year is also when the candidates for next year’s Residential Assistants for the dorms are put through a mild hazing. This usually means that they have to walk around campus and go to class in crazy costumes but aren’t allowed to tell people why.

A few years back a male student showed up in class in a formal evening gown encrusted with rhinestones down his sleeves. It was the same year a new college moved in right up the road from Judson. They seemed to pop up overnight. And they had a huge sign, Providence Baptist the Home of the Mavericks. Lots of students were talking about it and it was hard to get the conversation back on topic. After a while the guy in the evening gown said he thought it was ironic that Providence Baptist called themselves the Mavericks because they seemed so strict and narrow about everything. (“Chalk one up for the guy in the dress,” I thought to myself.) But this comment got the students talking about the new school again and one student said she heard that they didn’t even want their students hanging out with us. She said, “I heard they think were liberal!” And the guy in the dress said, "I don’t know where they get that!" (“Guy in the dress, For The Win!”)

But yes, John is a maverick. He goes his own way and loves to communicate through irony as we saw in both the stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Discussions typically have multiple levels of meaning and characters speak truths of which they are completely oblivious. I say discussions, but in reality in there are few extended discussions or dialogues. Usually it is Jesus who does most of the talking because few people can’t keep up with him.

That’s how it is with Nicodemus. He can’t keep up. He just fades into the darkness. That’s how it is with everyone in the gospel of John. No one is able to keep up with Jesus. Actually only one person is able to do that: the Samaritan woman. It’s very tempting not to just talk about the her because she is so exceptional—despite what people often preach about her.
But back to the topic at hand this morning. One of John’s differences or distinctives is that there are no parables. Jesus is God’s parable! The parables are replaced with the I AM statements. The I AM statements tell us who Jesus is to believers! They tell us how Jesus meets fundamental human needs.

To the thirsty Samaritan woman, Jesus is the water of life.
To the man born blind man, Jesus is the light of the world.
To Lazarus, dead in the grave for four days, Jesus is resurrection and life.

Because of this I am very interested in how Jesus reveals himself to Nicodemus, the religious teacher. What does the teacher of Israel, the professor of religion, need? Unlike the thirsty, the blind, or the dead, Nicodemus doesn’t think he has a need. Indeed, Nicodemus story is not about meeting his need—it is about revealing his need. It is about revealing our need.

It is telling that the first words out of Nicodemus’ mouth are, "we know." Because after his initial claim, he can only asks questions and utter astonishments. He gropes in the darkness with failed attempts to grasp what Jesus is saying, then just fades out of the story. He is a complicated figure, partly because he embodies so many of John’s oppositions. He is on the losing end of each exchange as he personifies that which is human and not from God, that which is of the flesh and not of the Spirit, that which is from below and not born from above. Ultimately he fades back into the darkness. Where is his exit? “We don’t know.”

Knowledge is indeed the issue. But Nicodemus’ knowledge is not helping him. Nicodemus needs the kind of knowledge Jesus offers. The kind of knowledge that Jesus offers is transformative and experiential. Jesus’ words in this passage are mysterious, yet speak of lived, experiential knowledge. In Jewish culture, to hear, to see, to enter in, and even to know, all describe knowing by experience. Nicodemus needs experience. Jesus says Nicodemus needs the first and most fundamental experience of all. Nicodemus needs to be born again, to be born from above, to be born of the Spirit. What does this mean? How are we to understand this? Let me take a diversion from John for a moment.

When I was 20 years old I had a profound encounter with Jesus that changed my life. But let me backup before that. From a fairly young age I had a lot of spiritual questions. From around age 10 on I was pretty serious about studying different religions. Even though I was raised in the Catholic Church and attended a university parish, lots of questions remained—about God, about life, about death, is there life after death, should we kill, should we eat animals—lots and lots of questions. I started reading about Hinduism, and Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism, and Native American spirituality, and things that some people refer to as New Age spirituality.

Yet none of my friends really had these kinds of questions. We couldn't really talk about it. By the end of high school and after lots of searching, I still had plenty of questions but few answers. Around this time I was reading Thoreau and some of the other New England
Transcendentalists. I remember thinking maybe I just need to get off in nature by myself to discover these answers. So I traveled to Hawaii and lived off the land for a little while—twice! Those were interesting adventures but yielded little insight. When I returned home the second time I was 20 years old. It was around this time I decided to give up searching for answers. After 10 years of searching—half my life at the time—I didn’t feel I was any closer to answers.

Well also right about this time my best friend, Bob, started hanging around with some people who were studying the New Testament together in a home group and some of my other friends started attending as well. I thought it was quite ironic that just when I had given up on finding spiritual answers, all of my friends “found religion.” I told them I really didn’t want any part of it. But I did pay close attention to my friend Bob.

You see Bob who was kind of ‘a piece of work’ as some people say. Bob was a wreck waiting to happen. Bob had anger issues and absolutely no self-control. This was most obvious when he was driving his car. He would cut people off, cuss people out, pull up next to them and use “aggressive sign language,” usually with me slinking down in the passenger seat, trying to become invisible, and tightening my seatbelt—because sometimes this ended up in an accident of some kind. Bob had “issues” and lots of accidents—automotive and otherwise!

For years I had seen how Bob was out of control and had no power to change! But then I did notice little changes. When Bob became a believer, for a time he still struggled with road rage. I recall he still cut people off and used choice words, but then he would say, “You know I really shouldn’t do that.” (Baby steps.) He actually began to change. Though I had seen how he had no power to change on his own, little by little he became a different person. That’s when I became interested in what was happening at that Bible study.

I don’t really remember what people said or did during the meeting, but I do remember when Dennis, a mutual friend of ours prayed. Dennis wasn’t what you would call a deep or sophisticated person. Quite the opposite. But when I heard him pray I could tell that he knew something that I didn’t. His prayer was simple but real. It was uncomplicated but genuine. I could tell that there was an authentic relationship behind his words. He had a connection. He had experienced something that I had not in all of my searching and study. He had spiritual, experiential knowledge that I did not. And it was real.

I remember going home after that evening and being hungry and thirsty for that. I wanted that kind of connection. I remember trying to pray like Dennis and seeking for that kind of connections—and finding it! I discovered that the answer to my questions was a “who” rather than a “what.” Since then, things simply haven’t been the same.

So what happened? The people I was hanging around then called this being “born again.” In fact, people used that term a lot in those days. Even the previous president talked about
being born again—as did many of those who voted President Carter out of office. I was fine with the term “born again” because for years that’s what it felt like. I remember I bought a sticker and put it on the back window of my old, orange Toyota. It had a rainbow and some clouds and it said born-again on it. I thought it looked pretty cool and I wanted everyone to know about being born again.

Nowadays you don’t hear people use that phrase much. Maybe it’s because it was overused, or abused, or because it became associated with a certain kind of Christianity. But I don’t think we should let it fall by the wayside or let only certain Christians claim it. Being born again isn’t conservative language or liberal language. It is gospel language. It’s red letter New Testament language. It’s Jesus own language! Language for a fundamental transformation.

Well one thing led to another—I know, lazy sermon writing—and I had opportunity to spend more time studying the Bible—lots more time (ending up with a Ph.D. in New Testament). Yet I have been continually impressed with how significant this new birth imagery is right from the very beginning of John’s Gospel. I like the way John starts his gospel. It’s very mavericky when compared to the others. If we think about the first gospel, Mark, it begins with Jesus’ entrance into ministry as an adult and was written in the late 60’s (those were crazy times). Matthew and Luke are each written some 10 or 20 years later, with 10 to 20 additional years of tradition and reflection on meaning of Jesus. It may be that both communicate a deeper sense of Jesus’ significance by moving backwards chronologically. Indeed, both emphasize Jesus’ miraculous, virgin birth. John, however, moves back far beyond this. Back beyond Jesus’ miraculous birth to his role in the creation of all things.

Many have pointed out how John’s prologue, John 1:1-18, functions like the overture for a symphony. All the themes and motifs are revisited and further developed. And John has structured this overture as a meticulous chiasm or ring structure that repeats themes in inverted order. It functions like a frame within a frame within a frame. It is a common structure in biblical literature and lends repeated emphasis to certain topics. When this structure is present it is always interesting to see what is emphasized by what forms the center or pivot point of the structure. For many years scholar’s simply assumed that the pivot point of John’s prologue was v. 14, the incarnation: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” But more meticulous study has shown that the central pivot point is actually the verse just prior to this: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” And what one realizes is that John didn’t skip mentioning of a miraculous birth directly from God. Rather, in his own mavericky way he reappropriates this language to speak of the new birth of those who believe. Those who believe and receive are born of God.
But what is John suggesting when he reappropriates this language to describe the experience of believers? In a broad sense, the accounts of Jesus’ miraculous birth in Matthew and Luke share an emphasis on the in-breaking of the supernatural into the natural and an emphatic declaration of divine sonship. Jesus’ miraculous birth discloses God’s desire and ability to enter into human life and history. It is a potent symbol for new life through the power of the Spirit, a unique, creative work of God. Hence, from John’s mavericky perspective, it is a fitting metaphor for the union of God and humanity, for the divine sonship and daughtership and relationship that believers now experience as born of God. I still find it staggering how John employs this language to illuminate the new life of believers!

They say that no creed, confession, or theology has ever gone beyond John’s prologue. And yet what we find emphasized at the very heart of John’s overture, the very pivot point of the prologue, is this miraculous birth from God—not of Jesus, but of believers. What is John trying to tell us?

Some suggest that John may have been one of the last of the first-generation Christians. Near the end of his life he is writing for second and third generation Christians, Christians who may be thinking that they are at a disadvantage somehow compared to their predecessors. “Wouldn’t it have been better to have been among those first generation of believers who experienced Jesus first hand?” But John will have none of this! John declares that there are no second and third generation Christians. There are only first-generation Christians! Each generation of believers must have a primary experience with God through Jesus. You can’t inherit it from the previous generation. You don’t get this from your parents. Just like in John 9 when the parents of the man born blind are called to testify at his trial. They can do nothing for him. They insist, "he must speak for himself."

Scholars also point out how no one ever converts anyone else in John’s Gospel. It is always the pattern that, whether it is the disciples or someone like the Samaritan woman, people simply invite others to come and see Jesus, and Jesus converts them himself, directly. Each person in John has a primary, first-hand encounter with God through Jesus. And this transformative experience begets new life.

Though I have been referring to the writer of the fourth Gospel as John, his gospel never states this. Rather he is referred to as the Beloved Disciple, not because he is special but because he models what is available to all generations, to all who believe, to all who are loved of God. Finally, scholars also point out that at the Last Supper it is the Beloved Disciple who is in the honored position, located at Jesus right hand, in intimate communion with Jesus as he reclines on his bosom. And careful readers realize they have encountered this imagery earlier where the final verse of John’s prologue symbolized the mystery of the very inner-life of God as the only begotten Son is in intimate communion located in the bosom of the Father. That is to say, the Beloved Disciple models the relationship, intimacy, and communion that is available to all generations, to all believers—to all who are born of God.
He models a staggering invitation to enter in and partake of the very life of God. *To enter in and be transformed!*

*What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.*

*Jesus said, You must be born again, You must be born from above, You must be born of the Spirit. But fear not, for this God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

*Thanks Be to God. Amen.*