

Being Born Again

Gen. 12:1-4 *So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*

John 3:1-17 *Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."*

It is primarily from this story in John's gospel that we get the idea of being "born again." It is Jesus' way of speaking about the life lived under the guidance and energy of the Holy Spirit. Being a "born again" Christian has taken center stage these days. It seems to be a kind of status claimed by some who are seeking to have their way in the political and moral realm. We glean from their words and actions that being "born again" means having a certain religious experience so that now one knows what is true and right, not only for oneself but for everyone else. A born again believer in Jesus Christ seems free to carry out wars, either literal or spiritual, on those considered enemies, and to focus on moral issues to which Jesus never spoke, while ignoring those about which he spoke a great deal, namely violence of heart and action, love of one's enemies, divesting ourselves of spiritual or moral arrogance, caring for the poor and solidarity with those condemned by religious and political power structures.

So we might feel like writing off the whole business of being "born again," or "born from above," as Jesus calls it. But what Jesus is talking about is too important for us to relinquish. It is what we most long for, what we are searching for—a new way of living that gives us energy, purpose and meaning, beyond the deadening religious, political, and cultural structures in which we are immersed. We are spiritual beings, and we want to live that way.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee and part of the power structure of Israel in Jesus' day—the Sanhedrin. He comes to Jesus "by night." On one level, Nicodemus may have come at night to avoid being seen with Jesus. This might have gotten him into trouble with the orthodox establishment. On a deeper level, the image of night speaks of the darkness of the womb that gives birth. It is the darkness of transition from one kind of life to another, from unawareness to awareness, from living in old, deadening ways to the life of intimate communion with the living God.

Nicodemus begins with a formal and stiff remark about admiration for Jesus. "No one could do what you are doing without a strong connection with God." But Jesus comes back at a different level,

a deeper level. He doesn't want to talk about his credentials. He's not the least bit interested in flattery. He senses that Nicodemus is really there for a deeper reason but can't find the words. So Jesus cuts through the small talk. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Jesus always seems to be coming from a different place. He doesn't have patience with safe theological and theoretical discussions. Jesus is on a more urgent mission. He wants us to live the way we're really meant to live--as those who know what God's kingdom is about and want to be part of it.

Nicodemus is stumped: How can someone be born again? Can we go back into the womb and come out again? You can't enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit, says Jesus. Baptism was an established Jewish rite of repentance, showing the desire and intention to change. And Spirit means opening ourselves to the direction, the leading of God's spirit. Being born of the flesh is how we came into this world. By "flesh," Jesus doesn't mean sinfulness, original sin, and all that. He doesn't see earthly life as evil. "Flesh" means life lived only at the physical level with all its frailties and weaknesses. If we live only at the level of material, bodily existence and never find and live out of our spiritual "center," we're not fully alive.

Nicodemus still doesn't get it: "How can these things be?" Jesus shows his dismay. How can you be a religious teacher and leader and not know what I'm talking about? How can we live so many years, gain so much technological knowledge, become expert in so many areas, and not get what it's all about? How can we be in the church our whole lives, do all the right religious things, and still feel so dead inside? How can we work with our spiritual disciplines and still not be going anywhere, stuck in our fears, grudges, anger, and clinging to safety all the time?

Jesus then launches into the heart of the Gospel, the Good News. God has acted throughout history to offer us new life, real life lived by the spirit of the One who created us. Now, says Jesus, God sends the Son into the world. God is not interested in judging or condemning the world, but in salvation, loving us into being who we are really meant to be. Salvation means life that is whole, healed, re-knitted together, life in communion with God. That is "eternal life." Eternal life in the gospels doesn't mean just life after death. Being "saved" means living fully now and forever. Being born from above means passing through the dark womb from life that is alienated, full of fear, guilt, anger, and into the life of God's kingdom, life filled with and led by God's spirit. The life of God's love.

Last weekend Kaye and I were at the Children Welcome Conference in North Carolina. Bill Lee, pastor of Loudon Avenue Christian Church in Roanoke, was the Bible study leader. He worked

with the story of Jesus and the children. Adults bring children to Jesus so that he can bless them. The disciples say, “No! You can’t do that. Jesus is an important guy who can’t waste time on children.” Jesus says to the disciples, “Shut up! If you can’t become like these kids, you can’t enter God’s kingdom.” John doesn’t have that story in his gospel, but he has this one about Nicodemus and Jesus. It’s the same thing.

Bill Lee talked about why we are so uncomfortable around children. One thing is that we are disturbed by their innocence, their openness, their responsiveness to God and to life. And we’ve lost that. We’ve gotten ourselves all messed up by rigidity in thought and behavior, by reducing religious faith to a moral or doctrinal code and strapping ourselves to it, by accepting without question the assumptions of our culture about what it means to be mature, to be happy, to find meaning. And in the church, we’ve succumbed in different ways to reducing the adventure of faith to the keeping of rules, or doing a lot of good things as though we’re earning a merit badge. In our case here, it is the risk we run when we commit ourselves to being a covenant community—there is a temptation to drift into legalism. We can work with our spiritual disciplines without ever letting the disciplines do what they are supposed to do—open up the core of our being to the fire and wind of God’s spirit that will take us to new places inwardly and outwardly.

We all want that innocence back and we think that it is lost forever now that we are all “grown up.” That’s why children make us so uncomfortable—they remind us of what we’ve lost. But we CAN get it back. We can get it back, says Jesus to Nicodemus and to the disciples and to us. We can be born anew. We can be born from above, by God’s spirit. And we can live in touch with and led by that spirit every day of our lives. It is never too late to begin, to respond to God’s call in Christ to live this journey of faith.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he pulled up stakes, gathered his wife and cows, and moved out. What an adventure! We never retire from God’s call to the journey of faith, of being re-born. We don’t know how Abram felt. At seventy-five, he may have felt like a kid again. Or he may have felt terrified and utterly dislocated, geographically and spiritually. Or both. Abram didn’t even know where he was going. God just said, “Come on, Abe. We’re going to a new land that I will show you.” What land? Where? How long a trip? Will there be motels along the way? Is there travel insurance? No information. No map. Even when they got to the land the first time, Abram and his caravan only passed through it. Abram was to remain a nomad. The possession of the land was generations later. But the most important thing is not the destination, after all, but the journey itself. Or as Ruth

Duck, U.C.C. hymn writer, puts it, the journey IS our home (“Lead On, O Cloud of Presence”).

So here is Nicodemus, bound up in the religious and political structures of his culture, sensing something is missing, coming to Jesus who was able to know what Nicodemus was looking for even if the Pharisee himself couldn’t put his finger on it or put it into words. He has already entered the womb of this new birth. He’s taken a risk coming to Jesus. He’s already leaving behind the securities to which he has clung, which have given him comfort and a sense of being an important, established person. He enters the womb of the night, stepping into that blessed darkness we enter when we take the first steps toward a new life. Having no answers. Not knowing where it would all lead. Just coming to Jesus who could help him open up to new life, the life of the spirit.

In our church we talk about the journey of faith. The inward journey of meeting God each day in prayer and study, of growing self-awareness and understanding, of embracing the whole of our lives, the painful and difficult parts, the gifts and the goodness. We take that inward journey trusting that in it we will find God’s spirit bringing us to greater wholeness, joy, and capacity for love. And the outward journey, the discovery of what we have to give to the world, of how God is calling each of us to share in God’s loving of the world into greater wholeness. It is a journey that is always before us, ever to be taken up anew whether we’ve been at it a few days or for years. It is not the easy path. Sometimes we are not even sure where we’re going. Sometimes it may seem like we’re wandering in circles in a desert. But along the way, we see the new birth happening within us—the freer, more courageous, more loving self that is emerging. We know enough to know that it is the only way to live, really live. It begins to feel like eternal life.