



Sermon

John 3:1-17
The Second Sunday in Lent
February 17, 2008
Historic St. George's UMC
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Born Again, AGAIN! Come and See

Jesus answered [Nicodemus], "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." John 3:3

The New Revised Standard Version of the New Testament may translate Jesus' famous late night, kingdom of God-seeking conversation with Nicodemus as "being born from above" but if you've been around the church for any length of time you know the words differently: "You must be born again."

"Are you born again?" the new pastor at my church asked me on the way to a youth outing. I must have looked as puzzled as Nicodemus. No one had ever asked me that question before. I wasn't sure what he meant.

The pastor went on about a time he'd asked the same question to a long-time churchgoer. That person said: "I was baptized, went to Sunday School, youth group, church services and have hardly missed a Sunday since."

"That's not what I was asking," the pastor said to me. I wasn't exactly sure what he was asking. I didn't know how to answer. But there was something in his question that made me wonder and still does. And there is something in this Bible text that makes me wonder, too.

Born again. There may be no more misconstrued, misunderstood, even misused phrase in all of Christian-speak.

The mind goes into free association. Church camp bonfires and the urging to "give your heart" to Jesus." The rainbow hair guy at the 80's Super Bowls and World Series with John 3:16 and "You must be born again" painted on his bare chest. It's what Billy Graham said would happen if you came forward at one of his stadium rallies. It's what they told me I was feeling when I went forward at the Christian Youth Cinema in Glenside, the evangelist saying "Jesus died for YOU: God so loved the world." It's

college students with tracts called *The Four Spiritual Laws* inviting anyone who would share their beach blanket at Ocean City to a personal relationship with the Lord. It's the autobiography of Charles Colson. *Born Again* was the personal testimony. Richard Nixon's political hatchet man, radically changed – like so many others – "saved" from dirty tricks or drugs, sex, crimes and violence by taking Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It's Jimmy Carter describing his Southern Baptist religious experience, mocked by secular media for saying he was a "born again" Christian in the famous *Playboy* magazine article. (See, I am actually one of those people who read it for the articles!) It's people who can tell you the exact date and hour of their "conversion."

Born again. It was what my youth leader and pastor wanted for me from coming to church. It must have been what John Wesley felt that evening on Aldersgate Street, when after a life of trying to feel something from faith, said his "heart was strangely warmed."

Born again. It is what some churches expect or require of their members to qualify as true believers. There are born-again Christians and then there are all the rest. It is a litmus test. It sounds like something *we can make happen anytime we want to* if we follow the recipe. It sounds so straight forward, so self-evident, as if every follower of Jesus experiences "born again" in the same rite of passage way.

Born again is what Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be in order to see the realm of God. By what the Gospel of John says, Nicodemus thought Jesus must have been kidding because how can anyone already born and grown up reenter the womb? Nicodemus thought Jesus must be kidding. But Jesus wasn't kidding.

Here we are again with this difficult, clichéd, loaded metaphor from John chapter 3. It's always worth taking a step back and thinking about – literal, biological meanings and stereotypes aside – what “born again” is all about.

“Born” is the past tense of the verb “to bear.” And surely that is an apt description of childbirth. Someone bears us from the world before into this one. She bears the pain, the labor, the weight gain, the responsibility. She bears us – alien creatures growing within her body – and she bears all that comes with us: blood, milk, mess, the bloating. We are literally born into being. It is not easy work.

So what would it look like to be born *again*?

Nicodemus presses Jesus on this, even chides him a little. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” he asks. “You can't enter your mother's womb and be born again.”

Do you hear a sound of longing in Nicodemus words? Who at some point hasn't wished to go back, erase, and rework some chapter in their life? Who hasn't wanted a do-over? Who hasn't yearned for a rewind button so the events of a fateful day or time might play out differently? Who hasn't held a baby and thought wistfully about their youth, innocence or how it might have turned out differently before age, wear and tear take over.

Jesus, it sounds beautiful. Almost too beautiful. Born again. Everything fresh and new. All our lives before us. But how can anyone be born again after having grown old?

Maybe being born again has less to do with what we do and more to do with the One who bears us. Nicodemus is right. We cannot ever go back into our mother's womb a second time. Our mothers love us but can they really be prevailed upon to bear us twice – although lots of mothers we know have tried. We know what uncut cords between parents and children look like.

The translation in the New Revised Standard Version helps us get at it when it takes the “born again” of the old versions and now says “born from above.” But prodded by Nicodemus, Jesus gets even clearer than that. He gets beyond “born

again” or “born from above” saying “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and *Spirit*.” (John 3:5) So, it is the Spirit that bears us from this world into the kingdom of God.

We can assume some things in this *bearing*. We can assume there will be pain involved: discomfort, pain and responsibility. The Spirit *bears* with us while alien creatures grow into fullness in the body of Christ. All the while the Spirit bears all that comes with us. It is messy and complicated. It is awesome, amazing, exhilarating all at the same time. And sometimes you don't look or feel as good as you'd like. There are repercussions. There are consequences. There is joy. There are mood swings and stretch marks. There is a new beginning. There is transformation. There are stitches and to be honest, some things not fit for polite conversation.

I remember attending the birth of one of our children – our first experience with the whole birth thing. The doctor said after a more precarious delivery than expected, “You think this was rough, wait until she goes on her first car date.” The doctor was right, times two children. And it hasn't ended there. But through it all it is as Jesus says, the Spirit bears with us and bears all.

Jesus sharpens the “born again” or “born from above” thing saying we must be born of the Spirit. To me this says that we do not escort ourselves down the aisle on our own, in the journey from born to born again. No, there is another force entirely. We cannot do it on our own. We cannot go back and erase, replay or do-over the years that have turned out as they have, much as wish we could.

We cannot bear ourselves. We never could. We never will. Only the Spirit can do that. Only the Spirit can usher us from this world of fixed realities to the realm of God's new possibilities.

When Nicodemus began to allow himself to be born of the Spirit (which by the way means “wind” in Greek), when Nicodemus began to allow himself to be born of the wind, you see this change from fixed realities to God's new possibilities. The one who first came to Jesus under the cover of night later spoke up for Jesus publicly

questioning the authorities who would judge him. Then after Jesus death on the cross, when all the disciples were no where to be found, it was Nicodemus who came forward to claim him. Nicodemus was no longer afraid or intimidated. He came to realize that he was born again, born from above, born of the Spirit, born of the wind, born not by his own doing but by the love of God who birthed him anew and gave him a life of boldness.

What would it mean for us to understand that we are born again, born from above, born of the wind? Most of us think we know who God is, who God calls us to be, what God wants us to do. What if we were to stop telling God what we know, to recognize that God is bigger than our naming of God and let God sweep over us without direction from us? What if we did not hold back but allowed the wind to take us places not on our agenda? What would happen if we listened to God call forth from us that which we can not recognize as being possible?

Throughout my life I have had people and circumstances call forth gifts which I did not recognize as being mine to give. The same is true in your life. Someone names a gift in you as if it existed, you don't see it, yet as you live into their expectation, you experience the reality of it – the gift is there. God calls into reality things that do not yet exist. God calls forth life we cannot bring about on our own. What might God be calling forth from you now? Can we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the untamed wind of God? Can we listen for we have heretofore been unwilling to hear?

In the first reading today, God called Abraham from the home he knew to a land called "I will show you." Later, from that land called "I will show you" God called Abraham

and Sarah from barrenness to birth, to a life that did not yet exist. Leaving the fixed realities of what they knew to be true, they moved from despair to hope, from old securities to new gifts, from death to life, from the old reference points to a birth process where they were born again and again and again with babies and yet way beyond.

The invitation to Abraham and Sarah, the invitation to Nicodemus, the invitation to us – this invitation to faith – is a birth announcement. To let go of past reckonings, clichés, "How-to's" and doing the "right thing," to let the wind-blow-where-it-will Spirit of God breathe life into us. When this wind blows, new life is never far behind.

What do you say if some asks you about being "born again" or "born from above?" Here's what my journey into faith is telling me. It's not so much about anything that happened to me once, then not again. It's not so much a recipe or litmus test. It's not so much anything I claim to take hold of.

What do you say if some asks you if you're "born again" or "born from above?" The answer for me is "Yes indeed!" Every time come to the Lord's Table or remember my baptism, every time I lift my life, raise my soul like a sail towards the wind of God, every time I open my heart, mind and life to "God so loved the world."

We may not be able to reenter the womb, but we can open our hearts to "God so loved the world and our souls to be born of the Spirit. May God bear us and bear with us along the windy way.

Amen.

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