

John 3:1-17 “New Birth”

Have you ever been asked if you were “born again?” I have. If you’ve lived anywhere in the Bible belt like I did for 16 years, someone *will* ask you if you’ve been born again. The conversation usually starts out like this: “Do you know Jesus?” That’s an easy one for me. I made a commitment to follow Jesus when I was 16 years old, so I could answer “yes” to that one. Shoot, sometimes I’d even throw in something like, “Not only do I *know* Jesus, I *follow* Jesus” thinking that this would end the conversation. But “Do you know Jesus” is just the verbal equivalent of knocking on the door to see if someone’s home. The next question is usually, “Do you go to church?” A simple “yes” is always the best answer. If I said, “Yes, I go to First Christian Church,” that would often lead to an unpleasant discussion concerning the kind of church I *should* be attending which, according to the interrogator, required a *very* specific answer. And of course, that’s not the end of the conversation. My choice for not elaborating about which church I attend only prolongs the interrogation, but I’m a glutton for punishment sometimes.

The next question is a pretty easy one too – “Do you go to a Bible believing church?” I think that one is kind of silly because I don’t know of any church in the Christian tradition that doesn’t use the Bible as its model for faith and practice. So I answer that one with a *super* affirmative like, “Of course” or “You better believe I do!” But if the person is a particularly skilled interrogator, they might see through my attempts to evade the answer they’re looking for, so they’ll ask, “Do you believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God?” But see, that’s a no-brainer for me too! Of *course* I consider the Bible to be the inspired word of God. But what they’re looking for is, “Do you believe that it’s *verbally* inspired” which means, “the human who set pen to papyrus was told exactly what to write and had no say in the wording.” If you decide to go down that rabbit hole, you’re going to get a lecture about how the only *valid* translation of the Bible is the authorized King James Bible of 1611. Because, as I so often heard, “If it was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me.”

The next question is usually where I'd start falling apart. "Are you a *born-again* Christian?" See, that label "born-again" has a lot of baggage. Microsoft Word won't even let me write those two words next to each other without suggesting that I either put a hyphen between them or capitalize them. Because what "Born-Again" *really* means is, "Are you the type of Christian who would stop a person in a parking lot to interrogate them about what kind of Christian they are?" I always wrestled with the temptation to ask the interrogator, "What does Born-Again mean to you?" It only takes once to learn that this is *not* a good question to ask unless you have a spare 30 minutes and a ton of patience.

It upsets me that the phrase "born again" has been co-opted by some churches and has become something that is more likely to repel someone rather than bring them to faith. Yet here it is in the passage that Joe read this morning from John's gospel. A scripture, I might add, containing the most widely recognized and memorized verse in the New Testament, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son and whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And yes, I have that memorized in the authorized King James version of 1611. You can tell it's the authorized version because it says "believeth *on* him" instead of "*in* him" and "*everlasting* life" instead of "*eternal* life" like that awful heretical updated King James Version of 1769. My journey of faith is ... *complicated*.

See, I believe that I *am* "born again" and that it's important to *be* "born again" but not in the way that some churches identify with that phrase. I think when I first got here 12 years ago, I said that this is one of 12 words or phrases that the church needs to re-claim before we lose its meaning forever. As I've said before, we tend to avoid this phrase because of what it means in our time and culture. But let's see how Jesus defines "born again." In this story, Nicodemus sneaks over in the middle of the night to speak to Jesus. Nicodemus is a member of the devoutly religious and highly respected Pharisees. In those days, if anyone could be trusted to know what the scriptures had to say about

anything, it was the Pharisees. Nicodemus's opening line when he meets Jesus is, "Rabbi, we know" which we can read to mean "We Pharisees know." Now what Nicodemus is *claiming* to know is quite positive and affirming of Jesus, but Jesus challenges him. He doesn't quite say, "You know nothing Nicodemus," but he might as well have. I like how Jesus replied, because it's so applicable for us. See, we *think* we know what "born again" means but isn't it nice that we can always count on Jesus to set us straight!

Let's take a look at this phrase "born again." You'll notice that the translation that's here in your bulletin uses the term "born from above." Greek literature uses a lot of clever word play, but sometimes those word plays don't translate into English very well. So the best way to look at this is to have Nicodemus be the one to say "born again" and then have Jesus to reply with "born from above" even though what Jesus says can *also* mean "born again." See, Jesus *could* be saying that we must either be "born again" *or* "born from above." But Nicodemus gets it wrong because he only picks up on the image of being born *again* and completely *misses* all the cool possibilities that open up if Jesus was being deliberately ambiguous! Huh ... what *is* Jesus trying to say here? Is it, "born again" *or* "born from above?" Yeah! Right? Which is it? I dunno! That's what the Greek looks like. I know that this may not make sense but work with me. I think Jesus was calling Nicodemus to imagine not only being born all over again like the first time, but *also* being born from a completely different *source*. As Jesus continues to elaborate on this concept, he ends up foreshadowing his own death by talking about being *lifted up* on the cross in order to be a source of life for all. And those of you who've been coming to Bible study know that John is all about Jesus foreshadowing his death.

So "from above" could mean that what the crucified Christ did by being lifted up on the cross allows us *all* to be like the crucified Christ, lifted up above on the cross and that we are to be born again into the kingdom of God. And the language that is used, "being born of water and Spirit" is definitely language that invokes the image of baptism which was big

for the John community of Christians. The act of dying to the “old self” and being raised again as a new “born again/born from above” creature in Christ is an image of baptism that carries on to this day in the Christian tradition. “Okay, but what’s your point Preacher?” It’s not *my* point. It’s *Jesus’*. Jesus points out some of the aspects of what it might mean when he speaks of the wind blowing where it will, beyond our control and our comprehension, and says that it is the same with those who are born of the Spirit. From wherever you are in the process, birth is like that - beyond our control and beyond our comprehension.

When our children were born ... especially in the case of our firstborn ... I think one of the most memorable aspects of that whole experience was that I wasn’t in control nor could I *take* control. At least not without getting in serious trouble! The only thing we could do was get in tune with what was going on and cooperate as best we could. Now if that’s what it’s like for the parents, how much more must it be for the one being born? See, at least Mary and I read about what to expect, and we went to classes ahead of time to know as much as we could about what was going to happen. But for the baby, it is a *total* mystery! But for this “new birth” that Jesus calls us to? Sure, we have *some* control in the sense that we can refuse to respond and resist the call to a new life. But apart from that, it’s as beyond our control and comprehension as it was when we were born into this world from our mothers’ womb. The very act of responding to the call of Christ and accepting the gift he offers involves a surrender and relinquishing of control over our destiny.

One more thing about how we’ve lost the meaning of “born again” then I’ll drop it. There are a lot of Christians who want to repackage the gospel as some kind of self-improvement/personal growth program. They make it sound like the kingdom of God is something we grow into and bring about by a process of self-transformation and social engineering. But Jesus doesn’t present it as something we can bring about or grow into. It’s something that is born, and that we are born into. We can resist it *or* we can surrender to it and be born into it. But we can’t “make” it happen. And when it does happen, we are not likely to

even understand much of what has happened to us, let alone be able to arrange it into a “simple four-step technique” to manufacture or measure the salvation of anyone else.

The impulse or desire of new parents to utilize some sort of religious ritual to mark and celebrate the birth of a child is almost universal. Even parents who have no religious faith often feel suddenly moved to seek some sort of meaning-making rite of passage. And one of the reasons for this is that a birth is such a mysterious and awe-inspiring event. Whether the birth experience is smooth and trouble-free or complicated and traumatic, there is something deeply primal and sacred about this uncontrollable birthing of a new life. It confronts us with the deep mysteries that lie beyond our capacity to manage and organize and understand. And it is at these moments when we stand and gaze wonderingly beyond the horizon of our own limits that we catch a glimpse of just what Jesus was talking about and how closely bound up these sacred moments are - the birth of a new baby, the birth of a new disciple of Jesus Christ, the birth of the kingdom of God. All of them place us in total dependence on the grace of God, all of them spring from the restless, insatiable, generative love of God, and all of them are signs and fruits of God’s desire to love and be loved and to bring to birth an age of justice and grace and joy. Come and see what it means to be born again!