

## Born Again and Again and Again

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Trinity Sunday

Holy Communion

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Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-21

Text: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." -- John 3:3

Few phrases get people as riled up as quickly and as passionately as "born again," which comes from today's gospel reading from John. Our reading is the story of Jesus' visit from Nicodemus, the Pharisee who was a leader of his local synagogue. Nicodemus comes to Jesus for spiritual direction, but he does so at night, presumably so no one will see him associating with the controversial teacher and healer from Nazareth.

And the ensuing encounter between these two Jewish leaders is one of those classic scenes of misunderstanding we find throughout John's gospel. Nicodemus begins by addressing Jesus respectfully with the title "Rabbi," which is a Hebrew word that literally means "my master," and it was what disciples called their teacher. It was a new-fangled term in Jesus' day, and it's not found in the Hebrew Bible. When Nicodemus used it to address Jesus, he was acknowledging Jesus' reputation as an authoritative interpreter of Torah, how to apply Jewish religion for day-to-day living.

And it may be that Nicodemus was one of Jesus' many disciples who helped to create that reputation that brought Jesus to the attention of the authorities. We know from the gospels that Jesus had many disciples, men and women, who were not named as the twelve were, and it was that growing body of followers that caused the Roman and Jewish authorities to take Jesus seriously. Indeed, there would be no Christianity today if it were not for those unnamed followers of Jesus. If Jesus had had only twelve followers, you and I would never have heard of him or them and no one would ever have heard of us.

But thanks to people like Nicodemus, who were people of some standing in their communities, the message that Jesus preached, reinforced by the signs and miracles he worked, began to grab headlines. And part of the reason it did so is because it was so hard to understand. That's what this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus is meant to tell us: Jesus' message was far from obvious.

"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." That's verse three of this third chapter of John, and it's Jesus' response to Nicodemus' somewhat flattering compliment that Jesus is the genuine article, a truly divine teacher, because no one could do the things Jesus does apart from the presence of God.

Okay, then, true enough, but why doesn't Jesus simply say, "Why thank you, Nicodemus, that's exactly right"? Instead, he responds with this very odd declaration that no one can see the kingdom of God unless they've been born from above or born anew, the Greek word can be translated either way.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he, Nicodemus, couldn't have recognized that Jesus had God's presence with him unless he, Nicodemus, had been born spiritually. He'd been born physically, but that wasn't enough to see God's kingdom, God's realm, God's presence breaking into the world through Jesus' life and work. It's a spiritual birth – being born again, to use that red-flag phrase – that allows us to see things that we otherwise cannot see. And this is important, because if we cannot see those things, we have no hope of participating in them, in God's divine activity in the world, and we have no hope of bringing God's love to our broken and hurting world.

Now I know that this may sound awfully exclusivistic to some of you. You may think that I'm saying that only Christians can do any good in this world, and of course I'm not saying that. You may think that I'm saying only Christians can be saved, and I'm not saying that, either.

What I'm saying is that there is a profound difference between the way people who live with a real spirituality look at the world and the way people without that spirituality look at the world, and that I firmly, truly, honestly believe that living spiritually is better than living un-spiritually, or what in the New Testament is often called living carnally or according to the flesh. This distinction is nothing more than the difference between living with God or living without God, and I'd be surprised if any of you are surprised that I think living with God is better. I do. I really, really, do.

Now let's go into this a little deeper and see if we can hear God's word in what I'm trying to say. And let's start by dispensing with some nonsense.

The first bit of nonsense we need to dispense with has to do with born-again-ism, the cult that you and I are familiar with that began to develop within American Protestantism during the second half of the twentieth century. The invention of television evangelists did a great deal to launch that cult, and it took on great energy and even more publicity after the 1976 publication of a book called *Born Again* by Charles Colson. You do remember Chuck Colson, don't you? Aid to Richard Nixon, convicted felon, founder of the Prison Fellowship, holder of fifteen honorary doctorates, and winner of the Templeton Prize, the world's largest monetary award for advancing the cause of religion. Colson wrote about his conversion to Christianity through his experience of trial, conviction, and imprisonment, and his book inspired many people to trust that God could still use them, no matter how badly they'd messed up their lives.

I certainly have no argument with that, but the nonsense comes in when we take the type of dramatic conversion experienced by Colson and others over the years and make it a template, that is, turn it into the only legitimate form of spiritual rebirth. An intense, falling-off-your-horse, wandering-around-stunned type of experience such as Paul had becomes the pattern of spiritual rebirth, and if you can't claim to have had one of those – and most of us can't – then you've not really been born again. And if you're

not really born again, then you're not really a Christian, and if you're not really a Christian then you're really going to hell.

That's the chain of nonsense that raises the hackles of many people, including me. Unlike many born-again Christians, Jesus doesn't over-specify what being spiritually re-born looks like. He simply says that you can't see the reality of God's presence in the world without it, and as I said earlier, I'd agree with that. I do believe there is a difference – a vast difference – between the spiritual person and the worldly, carnal person, and that difference has nothing to do with chromosomes. It has to do with how one perceives reality, interacts with the world, and lives one's daily life. The worldly person says, "What you see is what you get," whereas the spiritual person asks, "But what do you see?"

The difference between living spiritually and living carnally is a bit like seeing a glass half empty or half full, but it's more like those optical illusions that look like one thing one minute and a different thing the next minute – the old lady or the young girl, for instance. Or, for those of you who may be NCIS fans, it's like the message embedded in the tread-print of the killer's shoe. Most of us see just a shoe-print, but when something clicks inside of us – something over which we have no control – we see something else, something vastly more important, something crucial for our understanding of the world and God's intentions for it.

That "click" is what we mean by being born again, by being spiritually born anew. The world becomes new because we become new. We don't interact with the world the way we used to. We see things we didn't see before. We care about things that we once ignored. We have a purpose and a direction for our lives that we once lacked.

That's what it means to be born again, and the second piece of nonsense I have to dispense with this morning is that this spiritual rebirth happens all at once. It doesn't. It may *start* all at once, and I can attest that for some of us it does start that way, but it never ends that way, in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye. Spiritual birth is like physical birth insofar as it's the start of something far more important than what it ends.

Whatever your life may have been before your spiritual rebirth is of far less significance to God and all the rest of us than what your life is going to be now that you've accepted God's invitation to begin anew. Your past may be perfectly ordinary or it may be a shrieking mess, but the message of the gospel is that it doesn't matter. Neither the ordinariness nor the mess is determinative of your future; God's love determines your future *if you will let it*. That is the good news, the gospel, Jesus Christ came to bring us, and that is his daily invitation. Jesus Christ invites you, every moment of every day of your life, to be born anew. Not just once, as if it were magic – which is another bit of nonsense connected to born-again-ism – but over and over again.

And the amazing thing is, you can be! The opportunity for you to be someone and something other – better! – than who you are is waiting for you with every breath you take. The only thing holding you back is you.

Let me leave you now with a word of comfort and reassurance. Just as I have urged you many times to overcome your fear of being thought a Bible-thumping fanatic if you study and take the Bible seriously – really seriously – so today I want to urge you again to let go of your fear of becoming a religious nut case if you allow yourself to be born anew. It could happen, of course, but knowing most of you as I do, I think it very unlikely.

What I think is much more likely to happen is that a quiet, thoughtful, and

profound change will gradually transform you – each of you and all of you – into someone you couldn't imagine yourself being five or ten or twenty years ago. Having accepted God's forgiveness for yourself, you are much more ready to forgive others. Having experienced the grace of a changed life yourself, you are much abler to help God's grace change the lives of others. Having been re-united with the Ground of being itself, you know yourself to be much more deeply interconnected with all of God's creation, and you live with a new sense of responsibility to care for that creation as God has cared for us.

Those are the sorts of spiritual fruits borne by those who are born anew, and they have nothing to do with attending a particular kind of church or singing a particular kind of song or reading a particular translation of the Bible or voting for a particular kind of candidate.

Spiritual rebirth is neither scary nor exotic, even for folks as mainstream as us. Spiritual rebirth is as familiar and comforting as those words you hear me say every Sunday in this church: "Anyone in Christ becomes a new person altogether; the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven."

Thanks be to God.