

Born Again
John 3:1-17
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The question “Are you born again?” is a terrifying question for most Presbyterians, and most mainline Protestants. Richard Lischer, a Lutheran and a distinguished scholar who taught at Emory University, writes that, “One of the disadvantages of being a Lutheran is that you have so few good conversion stories. Those who tell their conversion stories with great gusto are automatically suspect in my denomination.” The same can be said for us Presbyterians.

The problem is that the perfectly good phrase, “born again,” has been appropriated by those whose spiritual style is different from ours, and for them the phrase and what they mean by it has become a kind of litmus test to determine the authenticity of one’s faith. “Are you born again?” sounds to many of us like, “I am but I don’t think you are and you’re in a lot of trouble because of that.”

Peter Gomes is helpful when he writes, “What ‘born again’ means is literally to begin all over again, to be given a second chance. The one who is born again doesn’t all of a sudden turn into a super Christian. To be born again is to enter afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to cancel your old mortgage and start again. ‘You must be born again,’ is an offer from God you can’t afford to refuse” (*The Good Book*, p. 188).

It is not a threat. It’s a promise. It’s a gift. It comes to a man named Nicodemus in the middle of the night, when he does something unconventional and risky and opens his heart and soul and life and future to something brand new.

Nicodemus: a man who is in the prime of his life, a community leader, a respected official in his religion, a man who is enjoying everything he has accomplished, his place in the community.

Nicodemus comes to see the young rabbi from Nazareth at night. It may have been because he didn’t want anybody to see him. He was embarrassed, this substantial, respected, powerful, middle-aged man to be seen, talking to, visiting with, inquiring of Jesus of Nazareth.

The conversation is tortured. “Rabbi—you must be someone very important because of all these wonderful acts you are performing—to turn water into wine. No one could do that without supernatural power.” Jesus’ answer is a non-sequitur: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.”

And now, we learn something interesting about Nicodemus. Not only is he middle-aged, secure, settled, and respected. He doesn’t have much imagination, which, come to think of it, is part of what happens sometimes on the way to becoming secure, settled, and middle-aged. In any event, Nicodemus doesn’t recognize a good metaphor when he stumbles over it.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?” The Greek word, by the way, *anōthen*, can be translated either “born from above” or “born again,” which is why it shows up differently in various translations.

The novelist Frederick Buechner has a little fun with Nicodemus’ literalism, and has him ask Jesus, “Just how are you supposed to pull a thing like that off when you are pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning?” (*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 122).

Nicodemus defines faith as keeping the law, all the rules and regulations of his faith. He’s an expert at it. You live up to God’s expectations by living a good, pure, moral life. But he can’t

see the new reality in front of his eyes, can't give himself to newness and hopefulness. "Are you a teacher and you cannot understand?" Jesus asks him out of frustration.

And then John, writing this all down, adds an editorial comment, does a little preaching: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." The Gospel in miniature, Martin Luther called that single sentence.

Nicodemus hears the surprising news that God is infinitely more than you can imagine. God is infinitely more than your religious systems and institutions. Because of that you have to rethink everything. God cares about keeping the dos and don'ts of your faith and your morality, but God wants more from you than that. God wants you to live fully, joyfully, and faithfully. God has something in mind for you, and sometimes to realize that, to claim it, to live it, you have to do something risky, something outrageous, something very brave, like coming to see Jesus under the cover of darkness.

God loves the world with passionate abandon, with utter commitment, and wants more than anything for you and me to know that, to let that amazing news change the way we think about the world—God's beloved, about other people—God's children, about yourself—loved forever by God; and to re-create us, so that there is no better way to describe it than rebirth. That's what happened to Nicodemus, too—gradually—which is also, I believe, the way it happens for most of us..

It's a gift and comes because, as John put it, God so loves the world, doesn't condemn the world, but loves the world, a gift—offered to you and me; an invitation to live all the life we have been given; to live in all the glorious freedom of knowing that you are loved and that nothing will ever separate you from that love and that Jesus Christ is God's promise, God's assurance, God's love among us.

The Bible, Peter Gomes writes, "is full of the companionship of the confused and seeking [like Nicodemus], men and women made of the most ordinary stuff who often fail to understand, who make mistakes, whose humanity is transparent, but who encounter the living God and whose lives are therefore changed."

How does it happen? Sometimes it happens when it's late at night and we're feeling a little foolish. And sometimes it happens because God forces the issue and comes into our lives with unexpected, life-giving love.

Born again. It may be God's summons to do something outrageous, like visiting Jesus at night, like joining the church, giving your love to a stranger, your money to a cause, giving your life away. . . .

And it may mean simply saying "yes" to the voice that has been calling you, prodding your conscience, compelling your love, saying "yes" to God's great love for you in Jesus Christ.

Born again. It's not a threat, it's a promise; a gracious invitation from the one who gave you life . . . to listen, to hear, to let go, to follow.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Thanks be to God. Amen.