

the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent

March 20, 2011

“Being Born” – John 3:1-17

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*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

*Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

When I was teenager, growing up at Penticton United Church, our youth group was taken to hear a guest speaker. This speaker told us his whole life story so far, and it was dramatic. A troubled youth, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, prison, and then, a miraculous conversion. He met the Lord, one day (I can’t remember how, exactly) and was “born again,” as he put it. He was cleansed from his sin, turned his life around, and was just as enthusiastic at doing good for the Lord, as he had previously been at being bad.

It was an inspiring story, yet I left feeling vaguely resentful. People like him seemed to get so much *credit* for being so bad before becoming a Christian, being “born again”. What about the rest of us Christians, who were just born into it, and raised in it, and were just moderately good our whole life long? Where was the credit in that? It made me resentful and even defensive, the fact that us life-long Christians didn’t get anywhere near the kind of attention the “born agains” did.

Well, that phrase “born again” comes from our story from the Gospel of John this morning, during a conversation Jesus has with a faithful and devout brother in the Jewish faith, called Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a lay person who studied the Torah, the teachings of the Jewish faith, and practiced a form of piety

and ritual purity that rivaled the priests. Probably well-off, a member of the Jerusalem elite, he comes to Jesus, the light of the world, by night. Perhaps he didn't want to be seen in the presence of this Galilean peasant, who has, in a short time, already stirred up trouble at the Temple.

Or perhaps, Nicodemus came at night because true lovers of the Torah found that was the best time to study the word of God. The household had gone to bed: no one was turning up at their door looking for resolution of disputes and they could focus finally on Scripture. Nicodemus wanted to understand more about the word of God, about the way of God, and so he turned in the night to the living word and way, the one Christians know as Jesus. Searching for the light, the way, in the darkness.

Nicodemus starts off confident in his own knowledge. "Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it." He can tell that Jesus has a particular relationship with God, and that something beyond the ordinary is happening. Yet Jesus responds rather cryptically to this affirmation: "You're absolutely right. No one can see the kingdom of God without being born ... *another*."

*Another*. It's a Greek word, with a double meaning: both "again" or "anew," and "from above." Whichever way Jesus means it, Nicodemus hears that in order to experience the kingdom of God, he must literally be born a second time, must make his way back up the birth canal and out again. How ridiculous, for a grown man to contemplate such a thing as being "born again"!

Maybe, like me, the phrase "born again" pushes your buttons. For some Christians, it's used as a way of defining who is a "real" Christian, and who isn't. Usually, the catch phrase "born again" is a stand-in for an experience of suddenly becoming convinced of one's sinfulness, deciding to turn to Jesus Christ as the source of salvation, asking Jesus into your heart and into your life, and making a public confession of faith, including being baptized.

It's also a kind of code for a whole way of Christian experience. This tradition insists that the most important thing for human beings is being "born again", and you can find hundreds of books and web pages on the steps to follow if you want to be born again. The implication is, that a relationship with Jesus, or salvation, in more traditional language, is something that we can and should achieve. Something that we can do for ourselves, by following the right steps to be "born again."

When you think about it, it's quite an extraordinary metaphor that Jesus is using, so extraordinary that it's amazing it could ever get to be equated with a one-time, rational decision somebody makes. Jesus says you have to be *born* again, or *born* from above. Whichever meaning he intends, he is talking about *birth*. And I know that not a single one of us had anything to do with ourselves being born. Not a single one of us earned our conception, or deserved our nine-month gestation in our mother's womb. Not a single one of us was in charge or in control of our birth. It

was something given to us, a mystery, pure gift, the gift of life and love. And it was the gift of a relationship, a family, that defines us from the moment of our birth, that gives us a huge part of our identity: we are someone's son or daughter, sister or brother, cousin or nephew or niece.

In Jesus' time, much more so than today, who you were born to mattered. In the ancient world, your birth family was the single, most important factor in determining your social and cultural status. You could achieve some small gains in status, depending on what occurred during your life, who you married, what you earned, how many children you had and who they married. But your basic birth status was not usually altered by very much. It meant that whatever circumstance you were born into, would remain your circumstance until death. It was the very opposite of an upwardly mobile society, in fact.

But to be born over again? To be born a second time? However unthinkable and impossible that would be, it would change your status in a fundamental way, especially if the second "womb" was of significantly higher status. It would be a life-changing event. And that second "womb" was in fact, God's very being? To be born from above, is to be born from the heavens, the realm of God. It is to be born of the Spirit, to truly become a child of God. Whatever status, lowly or elite, you might have, being born from above would re-create you, at a whole new level. Being born from above would give you a breathtaking new status — that of a child birthed of God: infinitely valuable, profoundly honoured, and deeply worthy.

Receiving this status, claiming this relationship, living in this trust, Jesus says, is what leads you to "eternal life". Which doesn't just mean, by the way, life after death, or heaven, or a reunion with our loved ones after we've died. The eternal life that Jesus is talking about is abundant life before death, as well as after it. Eternal life, as far as I can tell, basically means a life that is *true* and that is *whole*. God is offering us the means to truly come alive and to live life to the fullest, not just in some hereafter, but today and every day, when we can hear that promise and embrace it with deep and radical trust.

I think it's related, somehow, to "salvation". Salvation, after all, can mean both being saved from something, like being rescued from some terrible danger; or it can mean, being saved for something, for something wonderful. In Greek, the same word means both rescue and healing, both wholeness and salvation. So being "saved", far from being a once and forever event, is more like a whole lifetime process of being healed, of being made whole, of coming truly alive, of knowing everlasting life, of being birthed by God.

And, according to Jesus, it is God that is doing the work. It's God doing the labouring. It's God doing the birthing. And just like any pregnant woman close to the end of her term, God gets impatient and wants to get on with it. God wants to push us into greater maturity, into fullness of life, into a faith lived wholly in the world.

Not that we're not involved; far from it. Being born must a rude shock. For

your whole existence, you're dark and warm and protected, with your every need immediately fulfilled, without you even having to ask. No pain, no hunger, no discomfort. Then suddenly, strong contractions almost squeeze the life out of you. For hours, possibly even days, you're squeezed and pushed and forced along. Then you're pulled out, blinded by lights, hit by the cold, rubbed and prodded and poked. You've gone from completely safe and comfortable, to being completely vulnerable. It's no wonder your first reaction is usually a sharp cry or a piercing wail.

That is what the life of faith is like, Jesus says, to Nicodemus and to us: like being born. Not like doing all the right things, following all the right rules, saying all the right words, trying to believe six impossible things before breakfast. But more like being born. More like trusting ourselves to God, no matter how strong the contractions feel, or how painful the journey from the old life, to the new, can be. More like receiving with gratitude the amazing gift of life and birth and rebirth. More like growing each day, by God's grace, into the beloved children of God we are being birthed to be. More like dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity, turning from an old way of being and living into a new way of being. More like becoming intentional and attentive to our deepening relationship with God.

For some of us, the changes in the world in which we live, in the culture in which we grew up and were formed, are like a new world. For many of us, for as long as we can remember, we were born into the faith. Our parents went to church and our neighbours went to church and we went to church. We were born into it. It was part of our culture, part of the air that we breathed. Only now are we realizing that being born into a Christian culture did not necessarily equate being alive in the faith. We are learning that we cannot assume being born into what used to be a dominantly Christian culture will result in a lively church or faith community or even believing disciples. Rather, we need to be intentional, in our own lives and as a congregation, about the practices of our faith that will ease our way into the new identity Jesus calls us to.

In other words, we are rediscovering what Jesus told Nicodemus: that we need to be born. Born again, and born from above. That the way of following Jesus, of being faithful disciples, invites and even demands that we invite God to work in our life, and that we align ourselves with what we see God doing.

It sounds challenging, and you know it is. Thanks be to God, that rebirth is God's gift to give, God's work to accomplish, and God's labour that brings us new life. Amen.

resources: "Laboring God," Debbie Blue, in *Sensual Orthodoxy; Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh