

Sermon for March 12, 2017 – “You Might Be Born Again If…”

Westwood First Presbyterian Church

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Second Sunday in Lent, Year A – Texts: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:1-17

What are we to do with faith? It seems that lots of folks have a rather uneasy relationship with the whole idea of believing. On the one hand, faith is often seen as little more than naiveté or gullibility. While on the other hand, faith gets reduced to an intellectual exercise, or a magic wand that manipulates the world and its processes. Many see faith as a useless exercise that fails to understand or engage the reality of the world. Even more see it as exclusive club for a chosen few, while all others are rejected. I can't help but sometimes sympathize with those who feel that the world would be better off without it. Perhaps nothing demonstrates just how toxic faith can become than the baggage-laden term “born again.” Lifted out of its context and stripped of its meaning, the term has come to describe a certain “class” of believer, a specific set of ideas that are embraced, even to a great extent, a certain brand of Christian. If you pray a certain prayer, recite a certain creed, subscribe to a certain set of doctrines and attend a certain kind of church then you can consider yourself to be “born again.” If you've stopped thinking in one way and have embraced a particular, alternative, set of ideas, a very often a “conservative” set of ideas, there too, you're said to be “born again.” And the benefit you gain from this “born again” experience? The guarantee of a blissful life after death. Or, more to the point, that you won't wind up in hell! This is referred to by some as fire insurance. Why? Because if you fail to jump through these hoops then you can kiss that eternal paradise goodbye and get ready to “burn.” And should you be one of those who's **not** been “born again”, well then, according to some you're dangerous. You're to be treated with suspicion, pity, exclusion and judgment. It's amazing how being “born again” can begin to look strangely like any other system of control, and the extent to which so many give it a very negative connotation.

Now, there's no question that the idea of being born again is connected to faith. The whole context for Nicodemus' night time rendezvous with Jesus is John's narrative of faith. It begins with the miracle at the wedding in Cana, and comes to a dramatic conclusion with the cleansing of the temple with Jesus' refusal to justify it by producing a miracle-on-demand. In all this, Jesus is drawing His followers and observers into a dialogue with faith. Not **about** faith, but **with** faith. To many of the people who were caught up in this dialogue faith was simply a decision which flows from seeing amazing things. It's the miracles (signs, as John calls them) which led them to “believe” in Jesus. But, this belief was just an idea. It was an agreement that what Jesus said must be true, (which is kind of fascinating in and of itself). It was an agreement that asked nothing of them and brought about no change. Nicodemus, it seems, was among those who started “trusting” Jesus. It also seems, that Nicodemus was caught up in this amazement. But, even the ideas were radical enough to challenge his theology. So as a religious teacher, he was bound to investigate further. He approached Jesus in darkness. A darkness less about the time of day than his lack of understanding. He began with flattering words. He indicated, like so many of those who'd become fans of this itinerant Rabbi, that he was impressed by what he'd seen and heard. “We know,” he said “that God is with you. The signs (miracles) prove it.” But there's no way Nicodemus could've anticipated Jesus' response which was to completely ignore what Nicodemus said and take the conversation in an entirely different direction!

It's here that we encounter the phrase "you must be born again" (or, from above, which is actually a better translation from the Greek). Then in a strange twist as if to drive the point home, Jesus speaks of the snakes that tormented the people of Israel. We read about this in the first reading, God responding to the complaints of the Israelites. Specifically, that they weren't being provided for while wandering around the wilderness. Apparently, they'd forgotten about the whole "freed from slavery in Egypt thing". They'd forgotten the parting of the Red Sea episode. The manna and the quail must've slipped their minds as well. Oh, and there was that water from the rock too, which is, by the way, the problem with faith that depends on miracles...it always needs another one. And, although the snake bites were healed by a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole that people needed only to look at, even **that** became an idol that drew people's hearts away from God. So, Jesus, referring to Himself as the one who would save, speaks of being lifted up like the bronze snake. This is, of course, an obvious reference to His crucifixion. But, the response He seeks is completely different from the one that's most easily and most often called "faith". Because it's not faith He's looking for, certainly not faith in the way most people thought of it! Jesus wasn't asking for people to get excited about His miracles. He wasn't inviting them to simply agree with the ideas He put forth. No, what Jesus is asking is actually far more radical than that. He calls Nicodemus, and all of **us**, to be born again.

But what does this strange phrase mean exactly? There's been much debate about this in scholarly circles. I tend to lean toward the view to which Jesus was referring as laid out by Ezekiel. Here's what the prophet wrote: "For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you...and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away...and you will no longer worship idols...I will give you a new heart and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart...and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow My decrees and be careful to obey my regulations". Being born from above (or "born again") is also referred to here as being born "of water and the spirit". Put that way, I get the sense that Jesus is referring in some way to baptism. And, it's no coincidence that throughout John's Gospel Jesus is said to be the One who offers "living" water. The One who promises God's Spirit to any and all who embrace His way. Ezekiel's prophecy points to this cleansing, transforming work of God. And, Jesus would've been right to expect Nicodemus to be familiar with this motif, not to mention the passage from Ezekiel. This goes far beyond just being impressed by a few miracles or agreeing to a few new ideas. It's not just about going to heaven when we die or avoiding hell. It's about much more. This is about "seeing" and "entering" the Kingdom of God. Embracing God's values, "heavenly things", here on earth. Living in line with God's purposes in **this** life, while we live it. Experiencing God's abundant life and helping others find it as well. So, what's Jesus saying here? He's saying "Don't allow yourself to settle for mere amazement here, Nicodemus." "Don't think that you can just nod your head in thoughtful agreement with a new set of interesting ideas that I'm preaching. Don't think I'm just giving you a ticket to paradise or a 'get out of hell free' card". He's saying that if you **really** want to know what I'm about, if you **really** want to discover the truth to which your faith and the scriptures point, then you must allow yourself to be so consumed, so completely remade, that you see the world and everything in it differently. **Radically** differently. And, learn to live each day in a totally new way.

Interestingly, in six verses in our Gospel text, the word "born" is used eight times. And, most of us understand that birth is a painful and messy business. To be a newborn is to be in a place of complete dependence, a place of complete unknowing, unsure of your steps, unable to interpret what's going on around you.

A newborn is a clean slate, completely open to formative forces. Thus, when we're born again we're completely reliant on God and God's grace. Completely open to the movement of God's Spirit shaping us, guiding us. Sorry, but being born again isn't about praying a prayer, belonging to a particular church, or denomination, or believing in any particular doctrine. Would that it was that easy. No, it's about living. It's about what we **do**.

And so, brothers and sisters, with apologies to Jeff Foxworthy, here's the thing, If you can refuse to allow faith/religion to become oppressive and corrupt but can be driven by God's Spirit to care for the poor and vulnerable around you... You might be born again.

If you can accept all people, no matter who or what they are and do so without compartmentalizing or labeling them, embracing everyone as a child of God made in God's image... You might be born again.

If you can step out of the rat-race of accumulating and needing more and more "stuff" to prove your own self-worth. If you can live simply and generously in defiance of the world's values. If you measure success differently than the rest of the world. If you measure life in terms of faithfulness... You might be born again.

If, in the face of injustice, civil unrest, terrorism, violence and wave after wave of natural disaster, you can still proclaim a vision of hope and justice, peace and healing... You might be born again.

If you can devote every day, in some small way, to making God's kingdom a little more visible, a little more tangible... You might be born again.

It's a little like the story of the tight rope walker who walked across the Niagara Falls to the cheers of the crowds. After stunning them with his confident walking, he rode a bicycle across his rope, and then, he pushed a wheelbarrow across the chasm. One little boy, overcome with amazement shouted out, "Sir, you are the best tight rope walker in the world! I bet you could even push that wheelbarrow across that rope with someone in it!" The tight rope walker turned toward him and with a smile he said, "Well, then. Why don't you get in?" To be born again, to have faith, is to get into Jesus' wheelbarrow. To be born again is to place all our eggs in the basket of God's Kingdom. To be born again is living with God as our center. To be born again is to live certain of His promises, trusting in His grace, doing so whether our lives are overflowing with miracles or overwhelmed with the grief that happens when miracles and signs are nowhere to be found. If signs have brought Nicodemus to Jesus, Jesus offers a sign that's sure to surprise him. The entrance to the kingdom of God is in the shape of a cross.

In the story of the bronze serpent to which Jesus refers, the snake was a powerful symbol of death. But, it was also one of life and healing to those who saw it as such. Looking at Jesus on the cross is the healing power that Jesus Himself brings to save the world. Faith in Jesus isn't agreeing to a statement about Jesus, it's allowing our lives to be shaped by the cross. It's a willingness to bear the burdens of others. The promise of this life is the Kingdom. Life lived in the presence of God, what we call "eternal life". A term that I believe speaks more to a **quality** of life than anything else. Nicodemus appears twice more in John's gospel. In just a few chapters, he risks rejection by defending Jesus. Later, he joins Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus bringing a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint His body. It would seem, then, that Nicodemus learned something that night. It wouldn't hurt us to take notes, maybe learn something ourselves from this encounter. Likewise, our churches whose tables are being overturned, even now.

But whatever form our re-birth might take, we would do well to remember that Seeking Christ in our admitted unknowing, humbly gazing upon our crucified and lifted-up Lord, must always be our starting point!

Thanks and praise be to God – now and forevermore!

Amen and amen!