

Second Sunday of Lent  
Sermon for February 17, 2008  
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Genesis 12:1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5,13-17  
John 3:1-17

It's dark. Most people have closed the doors of their homes and are talking with their families about the day's events and preparing for bed. In my mind, I see Jesus sitting on one of the flat roofs of one of the homes in Jerusalem. Perhaps he's contemplating the past few days.

In the second chapter of John we've read about his turning water into wine at Cana, and coming to the temple in Jerusalem to drive out the money changers. And we've read about numerous other signs and miracles that are not named.

And now Jesus is brought back from his reverie by footsteps. It is Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, a member of the Sanhedrin, a leader, a teacher, and elder in the Jewish community. And he has questions.

"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."

And Jesus answers him:  
"Very truly,"

and when Jesus says: "very truly", it means "pay attention, take notes, this is important."

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again."

Nicodemus is puzzled. What are you talking about? I'm an old man. How am I going to crawl back into my mother's womb? This is impossible.

What does it mean to be born again?

If you were following along on the lectionary sheet when I read the Gospel, you may have noticed that I changed a couple of words. That was intentional. I wanted you to read one thing while I said another to perhaps grasp the dilemma.

The Greek word in the Gospel of John for the re-birth Jesus describes is "anōthen"  
Depending on the translation of the Bible you read, Jesus can be saying, you must be born again, you must be born anew, or you must be born from above. The New International Version chooses "again". The New Revised Standard Version, the one you

have on the lectionary sheet, chooses “from above”. The difficulty is that it’s not one or the other, but both. With English we can’t say both at the same time. That’s why I chose to say what you were not reading so that it might strike your mind to hear one thing and read another.

Obviously there are some agendas going on in the choices translators make. The NIV is preferred by Evangelical Christians because of its choices. For Evangelicals it’s all about being born again. That’s why the NRSV chooses “from above”. The translators of the NRSV shied away from using the “loaded” term in today’s culture, choosing instead to give the power to the operation of the Holy Spirit.

Personally, to insert “from above” in this conversation doesn’t make sense because Nicodemus responds to being “born again”.

So why the problem?

How many of you have been asked: Are you born again?

What does it mean to be “born again”?

Having been raised in an Evangelical church, being “born again” meant being “saved”. The key phrase was: “accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior.” It was the “conversion experience.”

There are Christians who know they are born again, and can tell you the exact day and time when it happened. There are Christians who know they have not had that experience. And there are Christians want nothing to do with what it means in our culture to be “born again.”

Scripturally, being “born again” was what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus, being zapped by the light, knocked to the ground, and having God put you on the right road – no ifs, ands or buts – the straight and narrow.

For me, I don’t think that’s what Jesus was talking about. To base salvation on a single interaction with the Holy Spirit means that those who do not have that experience are not among the saved. And that’s not what Jesus says:

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

I believe that all Christians are truly born again because they are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as we emerge from the water of our mothers’ wombs, so we emerge from the water of baptism – born anew – dead to our old selves and new in the life as members of the body of Christ.

This is no easy lesson. This is complex. But this whole exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus gets boiled down to a bumper sticker and a single verse.

If you watch sports, you've seen them. You're sitting at home watching your favorite team playing and the camera pans the stands and there's this sign "J316". A lot of people have no clue what it means. It must be some special code, most think. And in a real sense, it is a code, a Christian code that spells out s-a-l-v-a-t-i-o-n.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

It's the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of the fourth Gospel - The Gospel of John. The gospel lesson we heard today.

For me, this is a message of hope, but for some of us, if we count all Christians as "US", the code also is one of salvation for some and not others.

You see, I find that problematic because Jesus' message is far reaching and not confined to what would fit on a bumper sticker. Jesus opens up the message of new life to the operation of the holy spirit.

"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."

Like the Greek word "anthen", the Greek word for Spirit and wind is "pneuma". The same word that means simultaneously both wind and spirit. And that's the understanding of the operation of the Spirit in this world that John provides.

"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

The message is one of hope for the world and not one of despair. Jesus tells Nicodemus this truth when he references the incident in the desert with the Hebrews.

"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."

What Jesus is referring to is an oft forgotten episode. The Hebrews wandering in the wilderness had again offended God and were being bitten by poisonous vipers. Moses pleads with God to save them. So God has Moses make a bronze serpent and raise it up so that whoever it bitten, if they look upon the image, are healed and will not die.

That's the message John gives us about the cross. When we see the cross it does not refer only to the crucifixion, but to the continuity of Jesus: his life, his crucifixion, his resurrection and his ascension. These are all one, and we must remember that when we look upon the cross. For John the Cross is a throne for the king of kings and lord of lords.

That's what it means when we sing: Lift high the cross. From our vantage point, particularly during Lent when we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we look up to the Cross and see the promise of life everlasting.

In that moment we are all born anew, we are all born again, we are all born from above.