

## BORN AGAIN AND AGAIN

*<sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup>“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. <sup>17</sup>“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. <sup>18</sup>Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”*

(John 3:14-21, NRSV)

Are you “born again?” I knew how to answer this question in the days of my Evangelical youth. YES! Yes I am born again. I am saved. These days my answer is less straightforward. A few years ago I was trying to explain Mainline Protestant churches like ours to someone who asked, “Are people in your church born again?” “Yes and no,” I honestly answered. “Yes in the sense that they have faith in God and believe various things about Jesus. No in the sense that we are not Evangelical or Fundamentalist types who believe in proselytizing.”

The first and only biblical use of the words “born again” occurs in today’s text in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. It’s almost 2,000 years until the term “born again,” referring to an Evangelical conversion experience, begins being widely used. At first the words are closely associated with the Jesus People of the late 1960’s. But throughout the 1970’s the term became used by Evangelical Christians of every stripe. The mainstream media referred to the Born Again Movement and in the 1976 Presidential campaign Jimmy Carter used the term to refer to his own faith experience as a Baptist ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born\\_again](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born_again)). In 1977 Billy Graham published his famous book, *How to Be Born Again*, which had the largest first printing in publishing history at that time with 800,000 copies (<http://www.billygraham.org/mediaRelations/bios.asp?p=1>).

The Born Again Movement took a radical turn in the 1980’s when it burst into the world of American politics as the Religious Right. Up until then many conservative Christians strongly supported the separation of church and state. It is this group that has, in my opinion, given the words “born again” a bad name. Today polls show that approximately 50 million adult Americans call themselves Born Again Christians (<http://www.pupress.princeton.edu/titles/6781.html>). However, not all of these buy into the political agenda of the Religious Right. While Jimmy Carter still refers to himself as being a Born Again Christian, he is certainly not a member of this political camp. Likewise, not everyone who supports conservative politics supports the agenda of the Religious Right.

Some people find themselves turned off by Born Again Christians because of the way they talk about their faith. Mainline Protestant minister and author, Frederick Buechner, writes “You get the feeling that to them it means Super Christians... You can’t imagine any of them ever having had a bad moment or...used a nasty word when they

bumped their head getting out of the car. They speak a great deal about ‘the Lord’ as if they had him in their hip pocket and seem to feel that it’s no harder to figure out what he wants them to do in any given situation than to look up in Fanny Farmer how to make brownies. The whole shadow side of human existence—suffering, the doubt, the frustration, the ambiguity—appears as absent from their view of things as litter from the streets of Disneyland...on their lips the Born Again experience often sounds like something we can all make happen any time we want to, like fudge, if only we follow their recipe” (*Whistling in the Dark*, p. 23).

In today’s test, if someone had asked Nicodemus if he was born again his answer would have been, “No. Are you crazy?” He said as much to Jesus during their famous late night conversation. Nicodemus begins the discussion by flattering Jesus. Nicodemus says, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him” (John 3:2). His kind conversation starter is totally ignored as Jesus cuts through the niceties and goes straight to the heart of the matter replying with the seeming non sequitur, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, one cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3).

Nicodemus has been operating on a strictly material plane, not a spiritual one, so he altogether misses what Jesus is saying and replies, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born” (v. 4)?

Jesus responds to Nicodemus with a lengthy discourse repeating the need for the birth of his spiritual self. It actually sounds a little like the Pharisee’s legalisms that Nicodemus found himself buried in already: that the individual bears the burden of bringing about this birth. However, right in the midst of this, Jesus makes one of the

most wonderful analogies about God that we find in the New Testament. He says, “The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit” (v. 8). In other words, we don’t have God in a box. We don’t understand everything God has done in the past, and we sure don’t know what God will do in the future. And yet, like feeling the unseen wind, we can perceive from time to time that God is active in our lives and that is enough. It has to be enough because that is what we get. That’s why *faith* in our unseen God is the key. We walk by faith, not by sight. For someone like Nicodemus and sometimes for us as well, this proves mighty difficult.

The high point of this conversation occurs in those famous verses from John 3:16 & 17 which say, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

Jesus wants Nicodemus to know that God’s motivation is love, and that behind God’s mysterious interaction with humanity abides an equally mysterious love. He wants Nicodemus to know that God’s love for us serves as the driving force behind the relationship. That God isn’t interested in condemning our imperfections, but instead wants to help us become truly alive. God’s intent was, to use the words in John, to save us and give us eternal life.

What exactly is God trying to save us from and for? I like the way the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith puts it: that God saves us from “aimlessness.” God knows that if we have no higher purpose in our lives that we are doomed, doomed to feeling that life is futile, doomed to feeling cynical, doomed to wasting the precious gift of life that we’ve been given. Through the life and teachings of

Jesus, God seeks to save us from this aimlessness for eternal life.

When we think of eternal life, we usually think of heaven. And while that is part of the equation, eternal life is also a quality of life that begins here and now. When we begin to view life from an eternal perspective, from God's perspective, all of a sudden our values and priorities shift. All of those things that seemed so important, the meeting we just couldn't miss, the project that just wouldn't wait, the ballgame we just had to watch, take a back seat to growing spiritually, practicing kindness, and nurturing relationships. When we look at our lives from God's perspective, we realize that our greatest legacy is the people we have loved and helped along life's way. When we learn to live life attuned to God's Spirit, when our spiritual birth leads to spiritual growth and maturity we can begin to experience God's promises of peace and joy right here on earth.

A crucial component of Christian spirituality is realizing that merely believing certain theological truths, that Jesus was God's Son or that there's a place called heaven, is not the end of one's faith journey—on the contrary, it is only the beginning.

When I perform weddings I often tell couples that while we make marriage vows for a lifetime, we can only live them one day at a time. The same is true of the spiritual life. We can't just be born again, just become spiritually awakened and leave it at that. In one sense we must be born again every day. We must intentionally keep our spiritual eyes open lest our eyelids droop and we fall asleep at the wheel of life.

Some of us might look back on a time when we had a significant spiritual experience perhaps at a church camp, in nature, on a youth trip, or at a retreat. In the immediate

aftermath of such experiences we often feel our faith strengthened and our commitment to God deepened. However, many of us eventually get caught up in the rat race of life and the beauty of our spiritual experience and the subsequent commitment fades. That's why it is important to keep our spiritual lives as a top priority.

In his book, *With Open Hands*, Christian spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, contends that sometimes our lives are like a tightly clenched fist—unable to give, to receive, or to reach out. Nouwen beckons us toward a growing spiritual life where our fists unclench as we open our lives to God and to others. When our fists unclench and our hands open, we can join hands with others and with God. Our hands are open to serve others and our hands are open to receive the blessings that God has for us.

As Bill Leonard, Dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest wrote, “In a real sense we are ever *becoming* Christian, recognizing the presence of God in the unexpected places of life, learning to practice that Presence in struggle and in celebration...At its best, perhaps, Christian spirituality is the promise of wholeness that is to come and the grace to live with the absence of wholeness along the way” (*Becoming Christian*, p. 15). May you continue becoming Christian this day and in all your days to come. AMEN.

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## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Gracious God, whose mercy is higher than the heavens, wider than our wanderings, and deeper than all our sin: receive again your bewildered and broken people. Forgive our folly and our excess, our coldness to human sorrow, our passion for things of the moment. Change our hearts and turn all our desires to your way, that we may love what you love and do what you command, through Jesus Christ our loving Lord we pray. AMEN.

Adapted from <http://www.rca.org/worship/material/lent/fourthsunday.html>.