

BORN AGAIN . . . AND AGAIN

Lent 2: Shaped by new birth

John 3:1-17; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

It's relatively rare in our circles that we use the phrase "born again."

I *have* preached about it before, but not here.

And I've been at Park View almost 15 years.

Don't get me wrong. I've preached a *lot* about salvation, about God's transforming work in our lives, and in the world, about God's desire to see us made whole, reconciled, redeemed, about God's invitation for us to yield ourselves to him, to repent, and our need to respond to Christ, in faith—individually and corporately.

Yes, I've preached *often* about salvation.

But preaching that specific phrase, "born again?" *Not* so much.

And hearing that phrase spoken among ourselves? *Not* so much.

Maybe that's a good thing,

because those two words have taken on

a lot of different layers of meaning

that I think get pretty far from what Jesus meant in John 3.

The phrase "born again" has become well-used, at least in many Christian circles.

So it's a widely-recognized term in the Christian world, and therefore, widely recognized in the larger culture that's *observing* the Christian world, for better or for worse.

Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter in 1976 was probably the first major politician who went public that he was a born-again Christian.

Many others followed.

Super-star athletes, musicians, and actors, who at least at one time, declared themselves "born again," include the likes of Johnny Cash, Donna Summer, Bob Dylan, Herschel Walker, Kirk Cameron, Jane Fonda, Mr. T, and more.

I don't know, and have no desire to judge,

the motivation behind these public declarations.

I would guess the motivation runs the whole gamut,

from those who sincerely wish

to present a positive witness for Christ,

to those who are opportunists,

using a label to position themselves with some constituency.

But the effect of all this publicity about being "born again" is that these words have lost their original meaning.

They have been tarnished to the point

lots of Christians would like to get rid of them altogether.

Often, when public figures refer to themselves as born-again Christians, they don't use the phrase as a verb, the way Jesus used it.

They hyphenate it into a one-word adjective, to modify the noun "Christian."

So rather than describing

a profound and transformative spiritual process,

rather than speaking transparently about God's saving work

and their life journey of learning to yield themselves

to the work and will of God,

they are instead giving themselves a label.

Labels are great, when the goal is to categorize people, divide people into convenient groups.

Not so great, when the goal is to understand someone more deeply.

The label "born-again Christian" has become so weak that it seems its only use is to put someone in a box.

People assume that a Christian is either a born-again Christian, or some *other* kind of Christian, in which it's implied, they are not a Christian at *all*.

The result is that many Christians who have a more nuanced way of talking about their salvation, and spiritual formation, feel excluded by the use of "born again" language, and so have decided to reject it.

But I'm afraid . . . that when a metaphor gets overused and misused,
and we fix the problem
by ignoring the metaphor *altogether*,
we miss out on a potentially rich way
to think about and talk about our faith.

So my goal this morning is to at least get us to *consider*
resurrecting a worn-out phrase,
by putting new meaning into it.

Actually, what I mean, is putting the old, authentic meaning back into it.
This is an image—a metaphor—that Jesus used to describe a deep truth.
And Jesus doesn't throw words around carelessly.
There is an enduring quality about
the images and symbols and parables Jesus used in his teaching.

For that reason *alone*, I think it's worth the effort
to salvage this phrase, "born again."

So what *did* Jesus mean by it?

I think the tendency is to think Jesus meant
God starts all over with us . . . from scratch.
We didn't quite work out the *first* time around,
so back into the womb we go, so to speak,
and out we come as a new person that didn't even exist before.
Our old selfish ways are ancient history,
and now there is a new me!
Our very substance has been transformed,
so no *worries* about sin and suffering again, praise the Lord!

I'm not so sure Jesus had this in mind
when he told Nicodemus he had to be born a second time.
Incidentally, the phrase Jesus used is sometimes translated
"born from *above*," and sometimes "born *again*."
Both are correct. Doesn't matter.
In *either* case, Jesus' metaphor is *clearly* about being born
in a new and different way,
as Jesus said, born of water and spirit.

But new birth doesn't mean that God throws us out and starts over.
It means that God is doing a work of bringing forth new life in us,
the life for which God created us to begin with!

Being "born again, born of water and spirit" maybe is a little bit like
pouring water on a potted plant that's wilted and drooping.
That infusion of water brings new life,
it stands up again,
and the natural life processes, like photosynthesis,
start up again,
and the plant is able to be what it was created to be.
When we allow the Spirit of God to enter our lives,
new life happens, rebirth happens,
not because we are suddenly a different life form,
not because we become someone we were *not* before,
but because the Spirit of God unleashes us,
enables us to be and to do
that which we were created to be and to do.

And when rebirth happens, it's not a once and done thing.
Anymore than I can get away with watering a drooping plant
once and for all.
Being born again is a process of becoming more and more
a whole person of God.
It is a process of allowing God to work in us
and bring forth new life.
So we are born again . . . and *again* . . . and *again*.

But make no mistake.
Being born is no picnic.
I don't think any baby has *ever* had a good time being born.
Not that a baby has ever *told* us that, in so many words.
But we can assume the ride down the birth canal isn't a joy ride.

It's no easier getting reborn.
Rebirth means a reordering of our lives.
That's not a joyride.

I'm guessing Nicodemus *knew* something
about how hard this road would be.
Even *before* Jesus gave Nicodemus those unsettling words
about being born again,
Even *before* Nicodemus came to Jesus with his questions,
I think he had an inkling that the answers he would get
were *not* going to be easy answers.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night.
I suppose he thought it was safer that way.
There is a lot we don't know about Nicodemus
and his motives for asking those questions.
But as a Pharisee, and as a leader of the Jews,
Nicodemus had a lot to protect.
If he had any intentions of keeping
his respected position in the community,
he had better be careful around Jesus.
So if he was going to go directly to this revolutionary rabble-rouser,
and ask some honest questions,
some respectful questions,
he had better be careful who was watching.

It was safer to go at night.
It was more secure. More comfortable.
More like a baby in the womb.
I doubt Nicodemus was ready
for that excruciating trip down the birth canal.

I'm sure he was fascinated with Jesus.
I suppose the *idea* of becoming a follower of Jesus
was a compelling idea to him.
If it wasn't, he wouldn't have gone to such great pains
to talk to Jesus, sneaking out in the night.
But Nicodemus had too much at stake
to become a disciple just *yet*.
Maybe sometime *later*, when the time was right.
He was curious, but not quite *that* curious.
Not quite curious enough to stake his entire life on it.
Jesus told him that one who is born of the spirit,

lives in the Spirit,
and the Spirit, Jesus said,
is like the wind that blows where it will,
and you can't see where it coming from
or where it's going.
I'm guessing Nicodemus needed a little more stability than the wind,
needed his life to be a little more predictable than that.
Maybe Nicodemus went home to think.
John 3 doesn't tell us *what* he did.

Was Nicodemus ever born again?
We don't *know*.
We do hear about Nicodemus two more times in John.
In John 7, the chief priests and Pharisees
are holding an emergency meeting,
making plans to arrest Jesus,
and Nicodemus speaks up.
He didn't directly *defend* Jesus,
just brought up a legal technicality that was to Jesus' benefit.
But even *then*,
he was accused of siding with Jesus.

Then after Jesus' crucifixion,
Nicodemus joined Joseph of Arimathea
in embalming and burying Jesus' body.
But we don't know whether Nicodemus ever took the risk
of letting go of the securities of his position as a Pharisee,
of letting go of the securities of the womb,
and being reborn as a true and open disciple of Jesus.

Nicodemus *may* have lived the rest of his life
as a curious and sympathetic Pharisee,
but nothing more,
because he lacked the courage
to open himself to the possibility of rebirth.
He may not have had the will to submit himself to
the risk,
the trauma,
the vulnerabilities, and

the indignities
of birth.
And then enter into a new way of life,

Like many of us.

We *too* have areas of our lives
that lie hidden in the safety of the womb,
where God is trying to help us bring to birth new life.
We too have securities to which we are clinging,
securities that, as it turns out, are actually *impediments*.
They *keep* us from being reborn into the life we were made for.

Last week our daughter sent a video link to us in an email,
that she found meaningful.

It was a lecture by a social work researcher.
She had done an extensive study of people
she described as “whole-hearted” people,
persons who experience a measurably high level of joy
even in the face of serious challenges.

And she said the one common denominator she found,
in nearly all these people,
compared to those who were anxious and fearful,
was that these so-called “whole-hearted people”
all had a higher level of comfort with vulnerability.
They were willing to take risks,
to try new things and even lose in the trying.

That kind of hit home.

By nature, I’m more the Nicodemus type.

Hold back where it’s safe and secure.
But God is working on me,
and I’m trying to use the season of Lent
to give God the space to do that work.

I’m fairly certain I’m not unique.

Many, perhaps *most*, of us
could readily identify with Nicodemus.

But there’s good news, sisters and brothers,

in this rich birth metaphor Jesus chose to use.
Good news, *if* . . . we haven’t thrown out the metaphor.

See, babies are born into families . . . at least *most* of the time

When we are reborn, *same* thing.

We are born into families of faith,
into communities of the reborn.

We are *not* born in isolation.

The trauma of our rebirth
is met with the care and support of our sisters and brothers,
who *want* this new life to thrive,
and will do whatever it *takes* to see that it lives.

See, we are like midwives to each other
in the ongoing process of rebirth.

The church is both midwife, and *family*.

We help usher in this new life,
and then we *live* with it, within a family.

That’s what’s so beautiful about Jesus’ metaphor.

It’s a perfect description of the process of spiritual transformation.

I can’t give birth to *myself*.

I cannot single-handedly create the new life that’s growing within.

Nor can I single-handedly deliver it healthy into the world.

I need help.

I need the Spirit of God (spirit means *breath*, remember)

I need God’s breath of life,

blowing the life within me into existence.

Then I need a midwife to coach me and coax me

to allow this new life to see the light of day,

to let it thrive openly in the world.

And I need a family to help me *live* this new life,

as it continues to grow, and take on a particular form.

That’s a beautiful metaphor.

It rings true.

It sounds a lot like the way God has worked in *my* life.

I remember when I first consciously yielded my life to God.

And when I began to believe I’d been born again.

But in my *experience*,
that wasn't a once and done kind of thing.
The struggle to unleash this new life
that God breathed into existence in me,
is a struggle that continues to this day.
There are still labor pains, you might say.
God is still at work bringing forth new life in me.
I *still* need midwives to accompany me.
I *still* need a family to welcome this new life,
and help shape it.

And I invite the rest of us
to *also* embrace this rich metaphor.
To open ourselves to the rebirth God has in mind for us,
whatever it may *be* in us, that straining to be born.
I invite us to yield ourselves to God's work in us,
and to the work of our midwives,
and to the family anticipating this birth.

Now, let's sing a song celebrating new beginnings,
Hymnal #640, "This is a day of new beginnings."
Second verse says,
For by the life and death of Jesus, God's mighty Spirit, now as then,
can make for us a world of difference, as faith and hope are born again.

—*Phil Kniss, March 20, 2011*