

“What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?”

John 3:1-17

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What does it mean to be born again? We all know the term. Four out of ten adults in our nation identify themselves as born again Christians. And many evangelicals view being born again as an absolute requirement for authentic Christian faith.

But the term is only used in one passage in the Bible, in today’s reading from John 3. Even there, it may not seem to be used, depending on the translation, because the Greek word *anōthen*, sometimes translated as “again”, can also mean “above”. And if we look at how the term is used in the story, it is mysterious, so mysterious that Nicodemus never seems to understand it. Even Jesus says that being born again or from above is like the movement of the wind. We know it exists, but we cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes.

So, what does it mean to be born again? Some seem to assume that it is a very simple and straightforward idea that can be put on a bumper sticker or sign at a ballgame and everyone will understand. But will they? Is it really that simple and straightforward?

Well, the place to begin an exploration of this term is the place to begin an exploration of any biblical idea, with the biblical story itself. It is a familiar story, perhaps too familiar, yet a wonderful story filled with provocative images, rich complexity and many layers of meaning.

As the story begins, a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. We are accustomed to thinking that Nicodemus comes by night because he doesn’t want his colleagues to know he is talking to Jesus in such an intimate and respectful way, seeking his counsel. And there may be some truth to this perspective.

But nighttime is a common time for instruction. In fact, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, many sacred things happen at night in scripture - this conversation,

Jacob's dream about a ladder reaching up to heaven, Jacob wrestling with a holy figure. So, the fact that Nicodemus comes at night signals the possibility of the holy, something sacred, something significant.

The fact that he is a Pharisee is significant too. We think of Pharisees as the bad guys, people who are opposed to Jesus. But in truth, they are reformers, like Jesus. He has some pointed things to say about some Pharisees, mostly that they are hypocrites, about the worst thing a person can be in his view. But most Pharisees are faithful Jews, people who want to follow God's teachings in the Torah.

Nicodemus seems to be this kind of Pharisee. He is a faithful Jew seeking to reform his faith and he comes to Jesus because he wants to learn more and senses that Jesus can help him. At this point, we might want to note a question in the margins of our thought. Is Nicodemus an outsider who is seeking to become an insider to faith or is he a faithful person seeking to deepen his belief? We can read the story either way.

But either way we read it, Nicodemus affirms Jesus as one who has come from God, because of the signs he has done, and Jesus realizes that this Pharisee is coming with a desire to learn. So, he cuts to the chase. "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (or again)," he says. Nicodemus doesn't understand. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" he asks, "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

It seems like a reasonable question. Jesus tries to explain the unexplainable, that we have to be born of water and Spirit, the first of which may be a reference to baptism but is more likely a reference to our physical birth into this world, an experience that is very moist, as all who have given birth or been present at birth know.

But the Spirit part of this reference is both obvious and utterly mysterious. Part of what must happen for us to see the kingdom, Jesus says, is that the Spirit must be born within us. It is a concept we understand on one level and yet cannot understand on another. The Spirit is like the wind. We experience the Spirit flowing through us, guiding us, comforting us. But we can't explain how the Spirit works.

Thus, our second birth is like our first. We are participants in the process, we have privileges and responsibilities once we are born and

reborn, but we don't do the birthing. It just happens to us, which might suggest another question. Why doesn't it happen to everyone? Perhaps we have some role in this second birth, at least in allowing it to happen.

But at this point, Nicodemus has a different question. "How can these things be?" Jesus has done his best to explain the unexplainable, but it remains a mystery, a wonderful and sacred mystery, but still a mystery. So, Nicodemus walks away, scratching his head. Jesus walks away, scratching his head too, at this Pharisee's inability to grasp what he is saying. And then Jesus, or John speaking through Jesus, goes on to talk about the authority behind Jesus' teaching, how he is more than just another teacher. He is God's Son whom God sends into the world to extend love to all. He is the one who makes it possible to be reborn.

So, what does it mean to be born again? Are we any clearer now than we were before? Yes and no. It seems pretty clear that whatever we are talking about is very significant. It is necessary for all who would see the kingdom of God. It also seems clear that it has something to do with things beyond the ordinary. To be born again is to be born from above, of the Spirit. We alone can't do it, though we have to allow it, but what we are talking about is a transformation of our very being brought about by the Spirit of God, the renewal of our inner self.

Since this is the case, since this experience is of God, we can't quantify it, we can't define it; so, we need to leave room for it to become more than we thought. This is why there is something not quite right about putting the phrase on a bumper sticker or a ballgame sign. It's not that the idea isn't important. It's that it refers to something too big, too mysterious and too wonderful to fit in such a small space.

So, to be born again is to be transformed from the inside out by the Spirit of God, and one way this happens is through the kind of experience many evangelicals think of first, a sudden dramatic conversion to Christian faith.

I think of a man I baptized in Richmond just before moving to Winston-Salem. Joe was about 80 at the time. He was a committed agnostic, if that's not an oxymoron. He had been in and out of church over the years and was connected to a Sunday School Class, but he had

studied with a Russian philosopher and become attached to his unbelief. When asked a straightforward question about a biblical story, what he thought or believed it said, he would often respond with a discourse on philosophy, his lecture on the multiple I's being his favorite. "I can't respond to that question," he would say, "because I am not an integrated whole. I have many parts, multiple I's," and on and on he would go.

When I announced that I was leaving, something happened inside of Joe. He had been pondering faith for a long time, and the friendship of the men in his class had a profound influence on him, but something just snapped inside of him in a good way, a transforming way. He told me he wanted me to baptize him before I left, he was finally ready to declare his faith, he sensed something new being born within him, something real and life-altering, some movement of the Spirit.

So, on one of my last Sundays, I baptized Joe. He joked with me about giving his lecture on the multiple I's when I asked him the questions of faith, and I reminded him that I was younger and stronger than him, and we were going to be in water. I might just hold him under a little longer! But when the time came, he confessed his faith in Christ. He was born again, transformed from the inside out by the Spirit, and it was a wonderful thing to behold. There were many tears of joy that day.

And yet, not all born again experiences are like this. It's not always about a non-believer becoming a believer in a sudden, dramatic way. We come to faith in different ways and we are born again in different ways. I think of the experience of John Matthis, a beloved member of this church for many years until his death. John was a life-long believer who accomplished great things in his professional life in military and legal service, and helped many people in need.

But in his latter life, John went through a crisis of faith. It's not that he gave up his beliefs. He just had many questions that grew out of his experience and his inquisitive mind. He was a lot like Nicodemus in that he believed in God but felt a need for something more. So, he sought help in the night and the day, through various readings and conversations with me and direct counsel from his Lord. In the end, he was reborn, in a way, not like Joe, but still, he was reborn.

He asked me if he could formally rededicate his life on a Sunday morning, worrying that people might think it strange that a man who had been in church all of his life and was now past the age of 90, would be doing this. I told him it would not only be “O.K.” It would be wonderful for him to do this! It would encourage others who were on the same journey. It would let them know it’s “O.K.” to be honest about their struggles and that there is hope on the other side.

So, John came forward one Sunday and recommitted his life and I shared just a few words about his journey. There were many tears of joy that day too. John Matthis was reborn, the Spirit renewed him from the inside out, and it was a wonderful thing to behold.

We might even think about Abram and Sarai’s experience in Genesis 12 as a kind of rebirth. There is no mention of the Spirit, but God is at work in this story, taking the initiative, transforming their lives. This is what being born again is about.

God calls these two to leave their home in Haran and go to a new land where God will bless them. The text says Abram is seventy-five years old. So, at the point in life when they should be deciding between Springmoor and Whitaker Glenn, God calls them to serve as foreign missionaries, with the promise that God will make a great nation of them, even though they don’t have any children. And the nation they will give birth to will be a nation of migrants, just like them.

After the creation account, two stories provide structure for the Hebrew canon - exodus and exile. In both the people are displaced, away from their land, immigrants. No wonder the most common ethical imperative in the Hebrew Bible is the calling to welcome the stranger! They have been strangers much of their existence.

Anyway, God calls Abram and Sarai to this new purpose. It is God’s doing, not theirs, but they must respond to the call. And it is utterly transforming for them and their family and a nation. That sounds a lot like rebirth to me.

Consider one final story of rebirth. In his book *Jesus Was a Liberal* Scotty McLennan retells a John Cheever short story entitled

“The Housebreaker of Shady Hill”. A thirty-six-year-old New York man with a wife and four children falls on hard times with a business he has started after leaving the company for which he had worked. He is ill-tempered with family and friends and seems headed for divorce. He even breaks into a neighbor’s house to steal money. Then, something happens when he goes to break into a second house.

While I was walking toward the Pewters’, there was a harsh stirring in all the trees and gardens, like a draft on a bed of fire, and I wondered what it was until I felt the rain on my hands and face, and then I began to laugh. I wish I could say that a kindly lion had set me straight, or an innocent child, or the strains of distant music from some church, but it was no more than the rain on my head – the smell of it flying up to my nose – that showed me the extent of my freedom from... the works of a thief... There were ways out of my trouble if I cared to make use of them. I was not trapped... And it was no skin off my elbow how I had been given the gifts of life so long as I possessed them, and I possessed them then – the tie between the wet grass roots and the hair that grew out of my body, the thrill of my mortality that I had known on summer nights, loving the children... It is not, as someone once wrote, the smell of corn bread that calls us back from death; it is the lights and signs of love and friendship.

The man gets his old job back. He breaks into the first house he stole from and returns the money he took. While there is no reference to the Spirit, the man is born again. He is transformed from the inside in a moment. It is not of his doing. It is a gift, but when he responds to this gift, his life is radically altered for the better. There are many ways to be born again, as many as there are ways to die.

So, that’s what it means to be born again – to say yes to God’s love, to renew our faith, to follow God’s calling, to find healing for our brokenness. Whenever we are transformed from the inside in a way that can only be from God, we are born again, and we are glad that we are!