

## Reclaiming "Born Again"

Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121, John 3:1-17

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I saw a great T-shirt the other day...it's one promoted through *The Onion*, the satirical newspaper that you can get here in town. The shirt read: "Stereotypes are a real time saver."

It made me laugh only because it's so true...

In this era of political primaries and religious rhetoric, certain phrases have taken on a life of their own... "liberal," "conservative," "evangelical," "religious." Their meanings ebb and flow depending on who's doing the talking, but most of the time they conjure up some pretty extreme stereotypes.

I'm finding people have major stereotypes for ministers, too. As soon as someone asks what I do for a living, and I answer "I'm a minister," it's like I can feel the box closing in around me. Which is why I usually find qualifying what I do,

"I'm a minister, but I'm not one of those narrow-minded folks."

Or "I'm a minister, but don't worry, I'm cool."

I would guess that maybe happens to you.

"Well I go to church, but it's not one of those kind of churches...we're laid back..."

Or "I am a Christian, but I am open to other religions, too"...

It's as if our very faith demands an apology or an explanation.

So while stereotypes may save time for some people, it's also a good thing when we can break them, which is hopefully what we will do today.

This morning's text from the gospel of John is one of the most foundational texts to the Christian faith and also one of the most stereotypical. It's what you'll see when you go to football games—John 3:16 written on a piece of posterboard. That's the verse that says, "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

Or it's language you'll hear when people talk about fundamentalist Christianity. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew." Or as many people translate it..."born again."

These verses, these terms bring up some serious stereotypes. For me, I think of televangelists, river baptisms, and people who hand out pamphlets at the amusement park asking questions, which for them, are the litmus tests for faith. "Are you born again?" Yes or no? "Are you saved?" Yes or no?

These are the people talk about making a decision for Christ...the widespread notion being that to be born again is a personal, individual choice to accept Jesus as one's personal savior and thereby gain entrance into eternal life.

This is the way many people hear the words "born again," and I would imagine the way many people hear the word "Christian." Which is precisely why I feel the need to apologize, "Well, I am a person of faith, but not one of those."

The thing is I am one of these. And so are you. As people of this Christian faith, “born again” is our term. It is who we are and not something that requires an apology.

So instead of this term being a stereotype of fundamentalism and exclusion, I wonder if and how we might reclaim it to be freeing and liberating, to be a word of joy instead of judgment.

The problem with the popular definition today seems to be the same problem encountered in the biblical story – a literal, one-sided interpretation, when there were expansive ways to hear Jesus’ words.

The gospel writer John is notorious for his symbolism – light and dark, heaven and earth, above and below – and he’s notorious for his double and sometimes triple meanings. His literal and metaphorical language leaves us wondering just what he means, and like a good onion, it requires peeling back layer upon layer.

In this story, we find Nicodemus, a highly-educated, well-versed religious leader coming to Jesus in the middle of the night. Symbolism 1. It’s night. Here Nicodemus comes to visit the light of the world, but he himself is both literally and figuratively in the dark.

And then it’s one of those conversations where two people are almost talking a different language. Nicodemus starts by complimenting Jesus, and Jesus responds by telling him no one can see God without being “born anew.” The word used actually has a double meaning. It could mean “from above” as a spatial reference or it could mean “again or anew” as in time. Nicodemus, hears it in the latter and literal way.

“What can you mean, be born again? How can a grown man re-enter his mother’s womb?”

But Jesus expounds again. “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of the water and of the Spirit.” Nicodemus is confounded, hearing only the literal translation – the birth of a physical body through the water of the womb and then a separate birth of the spirit.

But there is another meaning, too. The audience of John’s letter, who were the early Christian church, would have heard it as birth in the waters of baptism and birth in the Holy Spirit. To be born anew was to have the spirit or wind or breath of God moving in and through them.

There are some who take this passage, combine it with the concept of being saved, and say that being born again is about a one-time personal decision. Confess, be baptized, and that’s it. You are saved.

Yet, when I come across passages like this one, passages that seem confusing or difficult, I find it helps me to read them through the lens of the entire gospel. It’s kind of like doing a jigsaw puzzle. You can spend all your time analyzing one piece, but at some point, it helps to take a step back and look at the entire picture.

If we back up and look at the entire story of Jesus, it is fundamentally a story of rebirth – Jesus’ death and resurrection. It’s what we celebrate each Lent and Easter, that sin and suffering, while real in life, are not the final word. As followers of Jesus we are invited to follow in his footsteps, to follow in the ways of death and life, by, as the gospel writers say, daily picking up one’s cross and following God...daily surrendering one’s life to God, in an effort to be rebirthed in God.

In his book “The Heart of Christianity,” author Marcus Borg talks about the psychological need we have born again.<sup>1</sup> From the moment of our physical birth, he says, we begin the process of self-differentiation. As we grow up, we begin to have self-consciousness, a separated self. Gradually we become aware of who we are—first of our own fingers, later of our own faults and fallacies. Soon we become trapped by the need to achieve and accomplish; we become beset by fears and longings; we become disconnected from the source of life and meaning.

So we need to be born again, in a spiritual sense, in order to return from this exile and to reconnect with God.

We need let go of those old ways of doing things—those things that isolate us, that worry us, that keep us from God—and we need to allow the spirit to guide us into new ways of being, new ways of seeing ourselves and of seeing the world.

But just how it happens isn’t exactly up to us. As Jesus says, “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.”

If it’s not a decision that we make, if it’s not based on the right beliefs or our own determination, how then do we experience this birth of the spirit? Borg suggests that we can “midwife” the process by paying attention to our spiritual lives, by being aware of our ourselves, by engaging, both individually and collectively, in those practices that bring us closer to God—prayer, worship, scripture, reflection.<sup>2</sup>

I suppose this image of midwifery appeals to me in part because I spent my fair share of time in labor and delivery rooms when I was a hospital chaplain. I remember one midwife in particular, Carol, who taught me a lot about God.

She was in her fifties, with long gray hair that she often wore in a braid. Her eyes were soft and blue, and you could feel her calm and her kindness. It exuded from her, and there was a collective sigh when she walked into the room.

There was one night when a woman was having a particularly difficult birth. Carol sat by her side, wiping her brow, rubbing her belly, and helping her find comfortable positions between contractions. Her gentleness calmed the woman, and it calmed me. She stayed there throughout the night, soothing the woman while this mother-to-be waited for new life.

In the same way, when we pray, when we listen for God, when we worship, we become midwives for ourselves and each other. By nurturing our spirituality, we prepare our bodies and our minds for the Spirit’s birth, and our re-birth. And it’s an ongoing process.

When we back out from the literal interpretations of Nicodemus, we find the story of Jesus, and when we back out from Jesus, we find the whole story of God’s work in the world, which also is ultimately a story of rebirth, a story of midwifery.

God told Abram and Sarah, leave behind the familiar places. Leave behind your country, your kindred, and your father’s house—your old ways of doing things—and come with me. Trust in me and come to the land I will show you. Be born again in this new land, and I will make you a great nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, 113-117.

<sup>2</sup> Borg, 120.

God faithfulness echoes from Abram through the psalmist, who lifted his eyes up to the hills. Your help comes from me, says God, I will steady your feet, I will keep you. I will protect you by night and by day.

The story of Nicodemus, the story of Jesus, the story of God, is our story, too. A story not of formulas and stereotypes, but a story of constant rebirth, the story of a God who pursues us and provides daily opportunities to be born again into new relationship.

The reformer Martin Luther said it this way, "This life therefore is not righteousness but growth in righteousness; not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not what we shall be but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished but it is going on; this is not the end but it is the road."<sup>3</sup>

Are we born again? Perhaps the answer isn't "yes" or "no." Perhaps the best answer is "every day."

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "A Defense and Explanation of All Articles," (AE 32:24).