

FIRST LESSON: Numbers 21:7-9
SECOND LESSON: John 3:1-17
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“Born Again? Seriously?”

Sermon © Lisa C Farrell

Most people are happy that they were born, although those suffering from severe depression may at times wish they had never been born. But none of us had a choice in the matter. In 2019, a 27-year-old businessman from Mumbai, India was so disturbed by this that he decided to do something about it. He actually sued his parents for bringing him into the world. He argued that life was so full of misery people should stop procreating immediately. His mother responded, “I must admire my son's temerity to want to take his parents to court knowing both of us are lawyers. And if Raphael could come up with a rational explanation as to how we could have sought his consent to be born, I will accept my fault.”

We don't choose to be born, but can we choose to be born again?

The words we read this morning from John's gospel have been considered scripture for centuries and centuries. But the obsession with the term “born again” is relatively recent. It turns up first in a few scattered places in the early 20th century, but it didn't really take off until the 1960s. And with the popularity of the term “born again” came a new class system within Christianity—born again Christians, and regular Christians, which is ridiculous. Christians do not come in different flavors. And while the “born again” group considered themselves to be the only true Christians, and may still do for all I know, by this point in time for many of us the term now evokes a caricature of a fundamentalist with a superiority complex. But this is NOT what the scripture is talking about. Jesus was not describing a higher form of Christian commitment OR a particularly literalistic approach to faith.

Nicodemus approached Jesus at night. He was a highly respected man, likely a member of the Sanhedrin, a scholar, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. He probably came at night to preserve his anonymity. We know from later in John's gospel that Nicodemus tried to obtain a fair hearing for Jesus (7:50-51), and that he brought a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes for his burial (19:39). And despite the fact that he came at night, the fact is, he came. He wanted to know more about Jesus. He was not content to just go along with those who would condemn Jesus out of hand in order to preserve their own interests.

Nicodemus said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

This is very revealing. Who is “we”? Did some of the other members of the Sanhedrin know that Jesus was from God too and were deliberately opposing him anyway? We don’t know. And in response Jesus does not really address the issue that Nicodemus seems to be making. He completely ignores the reference to “signs”, which are the miracles of healing he has done. Jesus healed out of compassion, not in order to make a public demonstration of power. Even when he turned water into wine he did so to spare the bride and groom embarrassment. So instead of responding to this, he cut right to, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

“Very truly” is amen, amen. Amen means “steady,” “trustworthy” or “so be it.” It was a verbal expression used to confirm what had been said, and Jesus uses it a lot in John’s gospel to emphasize the truth of what he is about to say. These are words spoken with emphasis.

Interestingly the Greek language in which John’s gospel is written has one word for fathering a child and another for a mother giving birth. The word used here is the one for fathering a child. But Nicodemus doesn’t go there. Instead, he speaks of climbing back into his mother’s womb. He takes the process back to conception. And he’s confused, because this is impossible. And just to make things even muddier, the Greek word we translate as “again” does not just mean “again.” It can also mean “anew” or “from above”.

The modern “born again” movement focused on human decision. It was an evangelistic tool. Christians were taught how to lead other people to faith through repeating the sinner’s prayer of repentance with them. Pamphlets were produced showing the way of salvation in so many steps. When I was a freshman in college the big thing was the “I Found It” movement. Christians wore buttons that said, “I found it” so that people would ask them what they found and they could answer, “new life in Christ.” Like most corny ideas it didn’t really work out as planned. I was going to a Presbyterian Church at the time that had an older interim minister from Wales. When they accosted him asking if he had found it, he told them he never lost it!

The idea of spiritual rebirth was not new to Judaism, and Nicodemus would have known that. Converts to Judaism were considered reborn. What Nicodemus may have been pushing back at was the idea that a Jew needed this kind of rebirth. It may have simply been impossible for him to imagine God’s chosen people needing to be reborn in this way. God’s plan of salvation was given in the Law, and Jews had the Law! As a Pharisee he excelled in the keeping the law, and it was by keeping the Law one entered the Kingdom of God. Entry to the kingdom of heaven depended upon being Jewish and keeping the Law. Period. End of story.

But what Jesus said was the exact opposite of this. No matter what Nicodemus did, it would never be enough. The only way to enter the kingdom of heaven is to be born anew and from above. God has to work in us. God has to transform us. God has to save us. We can’t do it for ourselves. **Babies don’t decide to be born.** We didn’t choose to be conceived and grow in our mother’s womb. There is not a single person alive who had any control over the circumstances of their conception and birth. And good luck trying to sue! When

Jesus says we need to be born from above, he is taking the process out of our hands. Salvation is the work of a sovereign God. It is a gift.

But we humans are control freaks. That's why we create pamphlets, specific prayers to say and spiritual rules to follow. For a highly respected scholar and spiritual leader like Nicodemus who built his life around obeying the Law in order to please God being told he needed something more didn't make sense. But Jesus went on to say that we need to be born of water and the Spirit. "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. . . The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

It is the Holy Spirit who brings us to life spiritually. And the concept is not entirely new to scripture. In Deuteronomy (30:6) Moses uses the imagery of circumcision saying, "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live." In Ezekiel, the prophet speaks the word of the Lord using the imagery of the heart, saying, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezek. 36:26) And in Ezekiel chapter 37 God shows the prophet a field of bones and brings them to life. Jesus has simply changed the metaphor to birth. But the message is the same. We can strive all we want, but unless the Spirit of God is at work we will remain spiritually lifeless. There is no formula, there is no set of actions, there is no degree of perfection to achieve. It all comes down to God's sovereign grace. God gives us the ability to believe, the gift of faith. And the reason is simple. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." Amen.

Numbers 21:7-9

⁷ The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

John 3:1-17

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.