

Sermon for Sunday, March 12, 2017 - "Born Again?"

Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Born Again?

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The rest of the Sundays in this season of Lent, we'll be hearing about people who have transformative encounters with Jesus. Today we hear about Nicodemus, someone who has a lot in common with many of us 21st century Americans. Nicodemus seems open to considering something new in his religious life. He's curious and rational. Nicodemus sees something intriguing in Jesus and approaches Jesus directly. He wants to understand more about who Jesus is and what he does.

Yet for all his interest, Nicodemus doesn't want to advertise his curiosity in Jesus widely - he comes to Jesus under cover of darkness, in the night. Perhaps Nicodemus, a leader of the people, doesn't want to anger the other religious and political leaders. Jesus is upsetting the powers that be. The Gospel of John tells us that Nicodemus comes to Jesus right after Jesus cleanses the temple of moneychangers with a whip of cords. Maybe Nicodemus is concerned about his own position and security.

Whatever the reason, Nicodemus seems to want to keep his interaction with Jesus secret, hidden, private. He isn't ready to follow Jesus in the full light of day. He needs some information, some answers, first. Seems reasonable.

But Jesus, in typical Jesus fashion, refuses to give Nicodemus a straight answer about who he is and what he does. Instead, he tells Nicodemus that he must be born from above, that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.

Here Nicodemus is just checking out this whole Jesus thing, gathering information, not really ready to commit yet; and Jesus tells him he needs to be born from above. That seems a little extreme.

The Greek words translated here, 'born from above', could also be translated 'born again' or 'born anew'. But no matter how you translate it, it's an intense metaphor. Being born involves change, disruption, transformation. It involves being pushed out of a safe, comfortable place into a much larger, riskier, and yet, more beautiful, world.

Nicodemus totally misses that Jesus is using a metaphor and interprets Jesus' words literally, asking, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus offers Nicodemus a metaphor to transform his imagination and his relationship with God, but Nicodemus gets hung up on the literal and totally misses the point. As he does, he makes it even more clear that Jesus is right. Nicodemus does need to be born anew.

Nicodemus wants to stay hidden in a safe, dark place. He wants to be fed with simple, direct answers. He wants to remain comfortable in womb-like protective darkness. But Jesus wants Nicodemus to live with God in the full light of day. He wants Nicodemus to move beyond absorbing simple answers and into full participation in the kingdom of God. Jesus wants Nicodemus to be born anew.

Jesus wants the same thing for us. Jesus wants us to be born again into full participation in God's kingdom of love, mercy and justice. Certainly, there are times when we need comfort and nurture, times when we need to be sheltered like a child growing in the womb. The Hebrew word for womb is also the scriptural word used to describe God's compassion. The Bible shows us our need for quiet growth in the womb of God's compassion. Yet the Bible also gives us images of God laboring to give birth to the people, to push them into the fullness of who they have been created to be. God wants us to be born anew.

So how does this happen for us? These days, Christians struggle with this metaphor and its implications. People speak of being born again as if it's something we do, as if we are in control - thinking that if we say the right things, do the right things, make a decision for Jesus or believe the right doctrine, then we will be born again. By implication, those who don't do those things can't be born again.

The thing we seem to forget is that the one being born has very little to do with the whole birth process. The work of birth is done by the one who is giving birth.

So, being born anew depends upon God, not upon us. It is the work of the Spirit - the Spirit, that like the wind, blows where it chooses. We have very little control over the process of our being born anew.

That is a little unsettling and uncomfortable. Like Nicodemus, we'd probably prefer more direct answers. We'd prefer clear steps outlining what to expect in our life with God.

We do get some assurances and some promises. We are assured, in the witness of scripture, that God has chosen to pour out the Spirit upon the church. We are promised that we are each given the Spirit and a new birth in baptism.

But that is just the beginning of a life-long process of ongoing renewal and rebirth. The Spirit doesn't give us new birth once and then leave us be; we are reborn over and over. We are born again when we are convicted of our sin and yet assured that we have new life in Christ. We are born again through the very body and blood of Jesus. We are born again when life events disturb us but still God brings new life out of them, as God promises to do.

The Spirit continues to nurture us and push us out of our comfort zone and into a larger, risky and yet more beautiful world. In that larger world, we aren't safe. We come up against the powers that be, the powers that oppose God's new kingdom and God's passionate love for the whole world. We come up against hatred and death - the sin that killed Jesus. That sin is all around and within us.

Yet in the face of all this, the Spirit gives us new birth, new life, again and again. The Spirit gives us what we need to live as participants in God's kingdom of love, mercy and justice.

This is what happened for Nicodemus. Later in the Gospel of John we see that the Spirit pushed him to speak up for Jesus in a heated conversation between the temple police and other Pharisees. Then after Jesus' death, the Spirit pushed Nicodemus to anoint Jesus' body with oil at great risk to himself. The Spirit birthed Nicodemus into new life. The Spirit does the same for us.

Let's take a moment to pray silently. Our prayer time will continue into the introduction to the hymn,

#397 Loving Spirit.