

“Born Again...and Again...and Again”  
Sermon by Rev. Trudy Irving, Guest Preacher  
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If you would know me much better, you would know that I enjoy stories, and I enjoy storytelling—Bible stories, and personal stories which I have shared with folks over the years. I think personal stories are very sacred stories. Some of your stories may parallel the stories of others, but just as we are uniquely made in the image of God, so are our stories sacred and unique that come through our personal lives.

I also enjoy inspirational stories just like our Bible stories and our personal stories, and I have one specifically called “The Dying Ember”. Unfortunately, the author of this story is unknown, but I want to share it with you as we begin our time together.

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. On a chilly evening, the pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor’s visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a big chair near the fireplace, and waited. The pastor made himself comfortable but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the play of flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember, and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone, then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet fascination. As the lone ember’s flame diminished, there was a momentary glow, and then its fire was no more. Soon, it was cold and, as the saying goes, was “dead as a door nail”. Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting.

Just before the pastor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately, it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said “Thank you so much for your visit, and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church next Sunday.”

My sisters and brothers in Christ, I have no fiery sermon for you this morning, but I have been sparked these past weeks by the words of Marcus Borg in his book “The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith”. I have been reading that along with you, even though it may have been in the quiet of my own home.

There has been much to ponder in John’s gospel story that we heard this morning, and just maybe the dying embers story may be a good visual for us to keep in our minds and on our hearts.

We briefly turn to today’s born again story from John, and we find it beginning somewhat abruptly. We are not told where the story takes place. We know only that Jesus is in Jerusalem during the Passover feast. The gospel writer also does very little to introduce Nicodemus. Nicodemus was one of the respected leaders of the Pharisees, one of the most powerful and influential men in all of Israel during this time period. Nicodemus was a wealthy, powerful, religious man and, yet, he had come to Jesus under the cover of darkness, and there were no questions at first from Nicodemus. He simply remarked that Jesus seemed to come from God.

If we merely glimpse at Jesus’ response to Nicodemus, we could easily interpret Jesus as being impatient and placing a command before Nicodemus “You must be born again”. What was Jesus saying to Nicodemus? What is Jesus saying to us—to you and to me?

As we wander through Borg's book, and specifically Chapter 6 that is entitled "Born Again: A New Heart", Borg shares with us that the notion of being born again is often expressed in the language of dying and rising, death and resurrection, and is utterly central in early Christianity and in the New Testament as a whole. Dying and rising, and to be born again, are the same root image for the process of personal transformation at the center of the Christian life. To be born again involves death and resurrection. Borg writes that the notion of being born again is sometimes quite narrowly defined.

In at least the first of the left behind novels that have been bestsellers for the last half decade, to be born again is defined even more narrowly by being practically compared with believing in the Rapture and the imminent second coming of Jesus.

During my time in seminary which was just a few short years ago, from 2003 to 2006, I had the seminary experience of writing critical essays for my New Testament professor. When I had to write an essay on the Book of Revelation, I specifically remember starting it. This was the first time I have approached the Book of Revelation and NOT felt left behind; hence, such a series of novels that may come into our lives can really narrow the thinking. We are encouraged to read between the lines of Scripture, to see what is there in the blank spaces.

Borg goes on to say, but rightly understood, that being born again is a very rich and comprehensive notion. It is at the very center of the New Testament and the Christian life, and we need to reclaim it.

Most of us, I am sure, who have gathered here today have heard of this notion before and maybe, like me, along your life's journey, you have been asked if you have been saved or if you have been born again. Jesus said to Nicodemus "You must be born again."

Too quickly, we dismiss the term and that's too bad because Jesus is talking about today what may be the most important discipline of the Christian life, what may be at the heart of Christianity. Jesus was talking about defining our identities, not by earthly standards, but by spiritual standards—dying and rising, dying to an old way of being and an old identity, and being born into a new way of being and a new identity, into a life centered in God, in the Spirit, in Christ.

It is not the first time we have heard that phrase "in Christ". The Apostle Paul uses the term "in Christ" for naming the new life. To the Christian community in Corinth, Paul wrote "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. Everything has become new."

"In Christ" also involves a new communal identity, a new, shared identity that challenges the sharpest boundaries of convention, the sharpest boundaries of principle. "In Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith" Paul wrote to the Galatians. Even the deepest divisions of the first century Roman and Jewish social worlds are overcome in Christ. Maybe we have become too comfortable in life and don't like this talk about being born again. Some writers have suggested that it might be asking us to give up something. Why be born again? Why change something deep inside ourselves when our present lives and present situations are just fine? Don't rock the boat! Jesus does have something greater for us. We must be born again. We need to be born again. In fact, we need to be born again...and again...and again.

Borg goes on to tell us that we feel okay or not okay about ourselves to the extent that we measure up to the messages we have internalized. In our culture, these messages center around "the 3 As"—appearance, achievement and affluence. Borg reminds us of the issues of our adolescence. Let's go back to the day, my brothers and sisters in Christ, when we asked ourselves are we attractive enough, do we look good enough and are we "cool".

He then goes on to tell us how the issues of attractiveness continue into adulthood, whether we want to acknowledge that or not. Now, they are accompanied by issues of achievement, affluence, also issues of intimacy, sensitivity and caring--am I enough, am I good enough. We are created in the image of God, but we live our lives outside of paradise, east of Eden, in a world of estrangement and self preoccupation. It is the inevitable result of growing up and of becoming selves. None of us, whether successes or failures, escapes it, thus we need to be born again.

I embrace, and I celebrate the notion of being born again...and again...and again because, like Borg, I believe it is a process. For most of us, being born again isn't a single intense experience, but a gradual and incremental process—a process that continues through a lifetime, step by step. The Christian life, as it matures, is evermore deeply centered in the Spirit, that is, centered in the Spirit of God as known in Jesus, in the Spirit of Christ. Jesus calls it being born from above or being born of the Spirit. It is a life of freedom and wonder.

Jesus, in John 3:8 (which we did not hear this morning in the reading), goes on to say that the wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going, you cannot explain how people are born of the Spirit.

I have actually been born again many times in my life, and I hope to be reborn from above many more times. The wind blows wherever it wants. The wind of rebirth is the wind of freedom and love, the wind of God's grace, and it is far stronger than what we imagine is our strength and constant sea in life. By being born again to the life of Jesus, we let our identities be shaped and re-shaped by this marvelous wind, this breath of the living God. We let our identities be shaped and reshaped.

I witnessed to you this morning that my most recent born again experiences have come only within the past ten years or less--entering seminary to study for a Master of Divinity at age 44, accepting God's call into ordained Christian ministry after being so comfortable and knowing so much about the insurance profession, a profession I served in for over 20 years. Through a seminary experience, and attending a seminary that required a cross-cultural experience, traveling to Ghana, to West Africa and spending three weeks immersed in what we were to experience as "otherness", coming back and understanding on my heart that, as God's children, we embraced so much more in common than what we had in differences. I was that middle-aged woman from a one-traffic small town who has been, and will continue to be born again...and again...and again.

After graduating from seminary and entering into the search and call process, my husband and I, quickly approaching age 50, having almost 100 years combined together in the state of Pennsylvania, relocated into the foothills of North Carolina, into western North Carolina...Lenoir...Caldwell County. We were both born again...and again...and again.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we cannot make it happen, but we can be intentional about being born again. This is the purpose of spirituality, to help birth the new life and nourish the new life, to be aware, to be intentional, and to practice. This spirituality is the process of being born again...and again...and again.

I don't know about you, but I imagine that Nicodemus had a lot to think about after his encounter with Jesus. In the conclusion of Jesus' time with Nicodemus, we don't know where Nicodemus goes or what he does, but Carolyn Lewis, in the commentary "Feasting On The Word", shares this with us of her perspective on this passage.

Nicodemus appears two other times in the Gospel of John. In Chapter 7:50-52, he seems to come to

Jesus' defense in the midst of the intense conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities that set off Chapters 7 and 8.

Nicodemus' last appearance in the Gospel is to help Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, with the burial of Jesus' body. Nicodemus first came to Jesus by night, under the cover of darkness. Now, in this last hearing of Nicodemus, he helps with the burial of Jesus' body. Was Nicodemus being born again...and again...and again?

In the literal sense, this invitation to rebirth is absurd. No one can literally be born again. No one can literally re-enter the womb of his or her mother, but we can die to an old way of being, and an old identity, and be born into a new way of being and a new identity, into a life centered in God, in the Spirit, in Christ.

Jesus invited Nicodemus, and Jesus invites each of us, individually and communally, to fully participate in the body of Christ, binding the body together and building up the body of Christ to allow the ember to glow once again, to be born again...and again...and again.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. Everything has become new, and to God and God alone be all the glory this day and every day. This IS a day of new beginnings.

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Guest Speaker