

# Sermon: **BEING BORN AGAIN**

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Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Realm of God without being born anew from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can you enter a second time into your mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the Realm of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born anew from above.' 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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

—*John 3.1-7*

It's not easy being born again.

Jesus spoke Aramaic. We don't know if he knew Greek. But some sixty or so years after Jesus died John wrote his gospel in Greek, and in Greek John has Jesus say you have to be born "again" and that word in Greek means literally "from the top," which both means from above, meaning from God, but also all over again, like a musician would think of taking a piece of music "from the top." This word "again" means both from God and also anew.

When we think of being alive we think of the survival of this *thing*, this body that's walking around: as long as my heart is pumping and my lungs are working and my brain is functioning I'm alive. Jesus says it's not enough to be born of water, of flesh; we are also born of spirit: what it really means to be alive is not that my heart pumps till it stops, but that God gives me life, and if God ever stopped I would cease to be. Jesus is talking about a way of living in which we receive God's life every moment

Back in the 70s the conservative evangelicals got a hold of that phrase "born again" and they turned it into an equivalent of being a conservative evangelical. And that's totally not what it means. It means living in a way that we receive new life from God with every breath.

Jesus did know Hebrew I bet, and in Hebrew as well as in Greek the word for breath and wind and spirit is the same word. Pneuma in Greek, ruach in Hebrew. In Genesis when God works up the soil of creation and breathes life into it, its' breath, and it's also spirit— that's what makes that ball of clay alive. Jesus says what it is to be born again is with every breath to receive our life from God. I'm not alive just because my mother birthed me sixty three years ago and I haven't quit yet; I'm alive because God births me this moment. That's what makes me alive.

Think of a waterfall. There's no such *thing* as a waterfall. There's no object that is a waterfall. It's just water falling. It's the falling that makes it a waterfall. The rocks, the height, the structure, none of that makes it a waterfall. It's the water that makes it a waterfall; otherwise it would just be a cliff. But it's not just water, it's the water *falling*. It's the flow, the process. Jesus says that's what it means to be alive, to be *breathing*.

What it means to be born again is to be given life over and over again, That's a wonderful gift but it's also really hard because to be born again we have to start over. If you're really going to be born again you are born as an infant, and golly,, is it ever hard to start over. You know what starting over is like, because you've had to do it. We all do.

Abram had to do it. He thought he had life all figured out. He thought it was sort of on the downhill slope right? He was retired, he was seventy five. All he had to do was play golf and read biographies and catch the latest stuff on Netflix. And then God gets a hold of him and says, "No, Abraham I want you to move to this new place ... I'll show you when we get there." Abram doesn't even know where he's going and he's got to start all over again.

We have those experiences in our lives. Sometimes they're wonderful, sometimes they're stressful. You have a child, you get married, you get a new job, you lose your spouse. Think about people who are getting out of prison or abusive relationships or getting over an addiction. Think about people who are finally set free. They have to start over. There are so many ways in which what *was* cannot be anymore. And it's so hard to leave stuff behind. But that's part of what we have to do when we're born again. We have to be willing to start all over.

There was a man who talked about having had a dream in which he was trying to board a plane for a city where something important was supposed to happen and he was working back and forth and back and forth between the airport and the airplane loading it with his luggage and there was this mountain of luggage and he kept having to go in and stuff it under the seats and over the overhead and in the other seats and he kept having to take another trip and stuff stuff in the plane and he was nervous that the plane was going to take off and he wouldn't have all his luggage or even worse he would be in the airport and it would take off without him— and in this dream he came off the plane and he looked at this pile of luggage and he realized that he wasn't in an airport.

He was in this field in the middle of nowhere, just green grass. And it was lovely but it was a little distracting and when he looked around he realized he didn't see his luggage. He couldn't find his luggage—in fact he couldn't see the airplane. He didn't even know where the airport was. Wherever he was he was nowhere near that flight and he knew he was going to miss it now and he just lay down in the grass despondent —and woke up lying in his bed feeling sad.

The hard thing about being born again is the same thing that was hard about being born the first time. You have to leave everything behind. You can't take anything with you. Nothing fits through that birth canal except you and even just barely. It's a squeeze. If we're really going to be born again we have to leave behind our status, and our possessions and our values and our beliefs and everything we think is right and everything that we've accomplished and our reputation and our self image. All of that, we let go of. We let God give us our self image and our values and our self worth and our working life every moment. That's hard to do.

Sometimes I've got it right and I'm listening and I'm loving deeply and I'm in that flow. I am really the waterfall of God. And then I forget. I'm managing. I'm loading stuff on the plane. I'm right. And I'm in desperate need of being born again. It's hard to do that.

SO why do it? Well, when you are born again you are an infant in the arms of God— and that's where we really want to be. And there's some deep longing in us that knows that. Knows that where we really want to be is with God. We really want to be the waterfall of God continually receiving life from above and letting it flow and receiving more.

It wasn't until a long time afterwards thinking about it that that man with the dream came to realize that at the end of the dream, lying there in that field feeling despondent, he was actually exactly where he wanted to be. It was much better than being in that city wherever it was. He realized that the lord was leading him, making him to lie down in green pastures. That's where he'd wanted to be all along.

'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free  
'Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right  
It will be in the valley of love and delight  
When true simplicity is gained  
To bow and to bend we will not be ashamed  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right

That's what gives us the courage to let go of everything and be born again: we want to find ourselves in the valley of love and delight. Find ourselves infants in the arms of our loving mother.

The wonderful thing is that our tradition gives us some concrete, practical ways to practice being born again. In Lent, we're given the traditional penitential disciplines of fasting and prayer and giving and they help us practice being born again. When we give we release something from our resources and if we give enough we become aware that we're a little bit more dependent on God. That's what it means to be born again, to be an infant again, to be *utterly dependent on God*. not on our own stuff. When we give, we practice being born again.

When I fast it makes me hungry. If I fast for long enough that hunger slows me down, makes me a little weaker. That's a good thing because then I'm more mindful of how reliant I am not on my own strength but on God's. It makes me more mindful that God's love can be flowing through me if I let it. It keeps me from just going on without paying attention. And if I fast long enough that hunger becomes something else: it becomes a deeper longing. I realize that spiritually I am like a newborn child who is desperate to nurse from its mother and get milk and be nourished and be held. *I'm hungry for God*. I'm ready to leave all of that behind and be born again.

When I fast I practice being born again. When we pray we can be mindful of God's love flowing through us breath by breath. We can ask for that and ask God to help us be mindful of that every moment of our days ask that we be a waterfall of God continually being reborn by new life flowing through us.

In fact, we can simply be mindful of our breathing, which is literally God reviving us. We breathe out, it's a little death. We empty ourselves. And until we take our last breath, that's a practice death, so we can breathe in and be revived, reborn and receive God's life flowing through us, life that we can't hang on to. I don't know anybody that can hold their breath longer than about a minute. We have to keep breathing, keep receiving, born again from God – fresh. Moment by moment.

In prayer we can practice being born again. And we're given this wonderful way to practice being born again together. We come to this table. We walk up to the communion table with empty outstretched hands needing to be revived, needing another breath, another bite, another moment of life, ready to be born again.

We come in communion with Christ who gave himself for us. We enter into that spirit of self giving in which we practice letting go of our old self so we can be born again as a new self. We eat the bread and drink this juice and it becomes part of our bodies and it totally changes into us; and we allow ourselves to be totally changed into Christ. Being born again isn't just a shift; it's a radical transformation from the inside out. When we come and consume that bread we're allowing ourselves to be turned into Christ. We do that in companionship and in the same spirit with the one who died for us. We practice being ready, always dying so that we might be

resurrected. Not just brought back to where we were but moving on to a new place. So we practice being born again so that we might allow God's breathe to flow through us every moment so we become the breath of God.

It just takes practice.