

Faith Mennonite Church
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Lent 3: Becoming Human: Called to new birth
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Born again...and again
Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-21

How many times can a person be born? I suppose the answer is just once if we're thinking in biological terms. But when we consider that our human experience involves not just our physical bodies, but our emotional, spiritual, and our communal identities, I'm sure we've all had a number of experiences in which we feel that we've been offered new life.

For our spiritual ancestor, Abraham and his family, new life meant geographical re-location. God called Abraham to leave the land which held his history and identity. God called Abraham and Sarah to venture toward a new land in which they would engender a new people with a new identity. By all indications, Abram was a man of wealth, and he took at least a portion of his wealth with him. But God's continued message to Abram was that the purpose of his new life was not just to prosper and receive blessing but *to be* a blessing, so that all the nations would be blessed through him.

The story of Israel that unfolds in the Old Testament is a story of interpreting that identity in each generation, that call to be both blessed and a blessing. Often, in the Old Testament record, those identities came into conflict. Then as today, it is easy for the experience of blessing to take on the character of privilege. And in no time a community begins to protect its privilege and blessing rather than to share and extend it.

This tension was still alive in the time of Jesus. To varying degrees each of the gospels describes Jesus' conflict with institutionalized religion. Jesus questions traditions and rules that restrict and bind, rather than freeing and healing. In the gospel of John, from which our Lent texts are taken this year, the writer often refers to "the Jews" as those who oppose Jesus. This can appear to the casual reader as if it's a blanket anti-Semitic term, or as if Jesus and his disciples were not Jewish. This gospel was most likely written near the end of the first century, and it reflects a reality after a major conflict had ensued and Jewish synagogues had expelled Jewish Christians. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, who died in 1998, specialized in the study of the Gospel of John. He suggested that the gospel of John tells us as much or more about the life and concerns of the late-first-century community in which the gospel was written, than about events occurring during Jesus' actual ministry.¹

Several other background pieces about this gospel will help us in understanding its message: The fourth gospel was written for a Greek audience and it uses the literary tools of Greek drama and mystery. It is highly symbolic, with an emphasis on signs, and on light and darkness. The central concern of the writer is that the audience who reads and hears this gospel will *believe* the message about Jesus at a time when first-hand witnesses and those who knew Jesus personally are becoming fewer and fewer because of age and death. While Matthew and Mark emphasized the kingdom of God (or heaven) and following Jesus, John's emphasis is on believing and forming a deep spiritual relationship with Jesus through the Spirit. For this reason, many of the stories included in the fourth gospel are unique to this gospel. The wedding feast at Cana, the woman at the well, and the night-visitor Nicodemus are part of the unique collection in John.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times*. Paulist Press, 1999.

Last Sunday we met the Samaritan woman who encountered Jesus at the well in the brightness of midday; she left a transformed disciple. Today Nicodemus appears in the cover of darkness and he fades from the scene without an indication of how he responded. He reappears two times later in the Gospel: in the 7th chapter, verses 45-51, he carefully defends Jesus before his fellow Pharisees when they are wishing to arrest Jesus. Speaking in a fairly guarded manner that doesn't necessarily give away the fact that he had visited Jesus, he asked: 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?' And following the crucifixion, in chapter 19, he joins Joseph of Arimathea, in preparing Jesus' body for burial. The account says that he brought 100 pounds of burial spices. One commentator suggests he was prepared to preserve Jesus body for the ages, rather than expecting a resurrection.²

Just like Jesus brought up the topic of the Samaritan woman's husband out of thin air, he launches into a discussion with Nicodemus about rebirth. This wasn't the question that was burning in Nicodemus, although we don't really know *what* his question was. Nicodemus starts off in what seems like fairly safe territory: '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.' (3:2) Handing out a compliment, an affirmation, seems like a good place to start, when we're meeting someone for the first time. But none of us are ever safe when we hang around Jesus. Jesus, the *logos* or word, the action of God, in John, is not interested in what Nicodemus thinks of him. He wants to know whether Nicodemus is willing to let God's spirit breathe new life into him.

While Jesus speaks figuratively about being born again, Nicodemus can only think literally. "Born again? I can't even remember my first birth. How could I possibly get back inside my mother's womb and be born again?" There is an interesting play with words going on here. The King James Version translated Jesus' statement as "born again." The NRSV, which we read this morning translates the statement as "born from above." The same Greek word can mean "again," "anew," or "from above." "Again," then, doesn't necessarily mean like the last time, but rather in a new way, in a spiritual way.

But Nicodemus is stumped: "How can these things be?" To which Jesus counters, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?' (3:10). It is at this point that Nicodemus vanishes from the story, but Jesus continues to talk. However the "you" that he addresses becomes plural. The mini lecture is not addressed so much to Nicodemus but to the entire community, and by extension to each of us today.

Jesus said that those who believe and do what is true move about in the light, but those who do evil, move around in darkness to keep their deeds covered. All at once the irony of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman jumps out at us. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and teacher of the law, who represents the heart of the religious tradition, comes in the night. So what is he hiding? And the Samaritan woman, who seems to have a difficult marital history, comes to Jesus in the light of day. What are her good deeds, her truth, we wonder?

In the end, it's not important that we figure out Nicodemus and the woman at the well. They are the writer's tool to get us to look at ourselves. When are we inclined to approach Jesus? Are we confident to come in the light, exposed and vulnerable, letting him ask us the hard questions about our lives? Or do we hover in the dark corner, captive to our doubts, not sure that we really want things to change, either in our private lives or in the church? Do we hide behind the tradition we've grown up in—either Mennonite or some other?

² Karoline M. Lewis, "Exegetical Perspective on John 3:1-17" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Vol. 2*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010 (73).

But Jesus said: you *must* be born anew. If we want to become fully human and not simply fade from the story, we *must* open ourselves to the wind of the Spirit. We can't predict what it will mean, or whether it will bring pain, but because this new birth is "from above," from God, we can trust that it will take us where we need to go.

We've been talking about family, singleness and marriage these past six weeks. While rebirth is not the same as our biological birth, there are important parallels. I don't know any couple who decides to open their lives to a child—much less a single person who unexpectedly finds that they are with child—who doesn't have some sense of fear and trepidation, mixed with the wondrous expectation of the mystery of new life. How will this new life change us? What will we give up? Will we have the financial means to care for this child and pay for their education? And then there is the birth experience itself—labor pains so intense one feels as if death, rather than life, is at hand. But the joy of birth, of a new being in arms erases the pain of only moments earlier. And every parent (and aunt, uncle, and grandparent) knows that we grow, and change, and are reborn as we interact with this new one who enters our life.

Yes, there are unsuccessful attempts to become pregnant. Yes, there are persons who pass the age of fertility without finding a partner to share the task of procreation even though that is a deep desire. Yes, there are pregnancies that end in miscarriage. And yes, there are births that end in death and serious disability. Giving ourselves to the task of being born anew carries risk. But Jesus' willingness to be "lifted up" in death, which the writer of John, refers to as Jesus' "glorification," gives us confidence that even a bad outcome, when we are filled with God's spirit, leads us toward life, now and eternally.

I hope that we will all take some time for contemplation this week, both about our individual lives and our life as a congregation. Recall and give thanks for the times we have experienced rebirth. Are we in a birthing process now that we might not even be aware of? Are we thirsting for change? Are we resisting or welcoming a new work of the Spirit in our lives?

There is never a better time than *now* to ask these questions. And there is never a better reason than that God so loved the world that God gave God's very self, in the form of a human, so that all who believe will find new life. God didn't take this action to condemn us but to save us and to offer us new life.