

Last week, we heard the story of Pentecost – Jesus had ascended into heaven leaving the disciples to continue his ministry on their own. The story of how the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and left the safety of the room where they were gathered in order to preach the story of Jesus to anyone within earshot. Our scripture for this week has quite the opposite feeling. We are back at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. And instead of boldly proclaiming the Jesus in the public square, we meet Nicodemus under the cover of darkness.

We don't really know why Nicodemus chose to seek out Jesus at night. Nicodemus is a religious leader in the Jewish sect of the Pharisees. Maybe he is fearful that if he is seen with Jesus that he might become a target of persecution. Maybe he doesn't want to draw attention to the meeting for some other reason. Metaphorically, the writer of John's gospel often uses light and dark imagery to symbolize the presence and absence of God. The use of night here may be a symbolic allusion to Nicodemus seeking the presence of God which feels absent to him.

He tells Jesus "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 appears to be a statement rather than a question. But in this statement we hear Nicodemus, and possibly the other Pharisees, wrestling with what this understanding means for them and their faith. Jesus seems to practically cut off Nicodemus and seemingly answers a question that has not yet been asked with a very confusing declaration: "...no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born anew." Nicodemus takes Jesus' statement literally: "How can someone be born when they are an adult?" But Jesus isn't talking about a literal birth in the physical sense. The word translated in verse 7 as "anew" is *anōthen* which also means "from above." Jesus responds that unlike the birth we experience at the beginning of life, this act of being born again is a spiritual birth.

The notion of being born again was central to early Christianity. As Borg writes in his book *The Heart of Christianity* to be born again involves death and resurrection. It

means dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being – a way of being centered in the sacred, in Spirit, in Christ, in God.<sup>1</sup>

Before we go much farther, I want to unpack two concepts a little bit that come up toward the end of this morning’s scripture. I preached on this text a little over a year ago so some of this may sound familiar, but I think it bears repeating. The first the concept of belief and then the concept of eternal life. Jesus says “whoever believes in him will have eternal life.” I have mentioned before that in his book *Speaking Christian*, Marcus Borg writes that prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “the verb ‘believe’ always had a person as its direct object, not a statement. ...To believe meant not only confidence and trust in a person, but also to hold that person dear – to *belove* that person. “the pre-modern Christian meaning of *believe* is *belove*, to give one’s love allegiance and commitment not to a set of statements, but to somebody. ‘I believe’ means ‘I give my heart to.’”<sup>2</sup> This understanding of what it means to believe drastically changes how we might approach this text. Those who *belove* Jesus, who commit to following in his path will experience eternal life. Which brings us to the concept of eternal life.

The use of the phrase eternal life in the text from the Gospel of John this morning can trip us up if we don’t understand that the concept of salvation in the Bible is rarely about an afterlife. When many Christians hear the words eternal life, they think of heaven - some place or experience where life will continue because they professed a belief in Jesus. But the “eternal life” that the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus point us to is, as Gail O’Day writes “a life lived fully in God’s presence.”<sup>3</sup> Eternal life is not about life after death; it is about a life that fully embraces the love of God for self and others. A life that is infused with the eternal.

To be clear, I don’t think the idea of being born from the Spirit or being born anew is one that is restricted to Christians. Christianity is on faith path that can lead us into an

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2003), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hulen, *John*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 127.

eternal life – a life lived fully in the presence of God, but it is not the only one. As a Christian, I find my help in Jesus, but I don't expect that to be true for everyone, nor do I think their salvation depends on it. I think God's desire is for each of us to be born anew regardless of faith tradition.

I have been thinking a lot this week about what it means to be born from above, to be born anew. In the last seven days I have watched baby robins hatch from their eggs on our kitchen porch, I have seen flowers blooming for the first time this season, and I have watched baby bunnies emerging from their den in our backyard. It seems as if new life is springing up all around us. I found comfort in the predictability of it all. The baby robins are in the same spot on our porch that other baby robins have been for the last three years. The baby bunnies are born in a den in our yard every year. The flowers always bloom again after the long cold winter. At first I thought these were perfect examples of being born again, but their not really. Being born anew is not about a repeating pattern of predictable newness, it is about being born in a completely different way. Being born anew is about existing and living in a way that sheds the old ways of being. More like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly than the cycle of winter into spring. It is about being transformed.

I came across this quote from Emmanuel Lartey: "To be in tune with God's reign and presence, we all need a transformative overhaul of our traditional ways of seeing and being. We need a transformation of our whole way of knowing and experiencing the world. When this happens, it's as if we have begun life all over again."<sup>4</sup> Our challenge then as Christians, is to engage in this transformation. To seek to be made new by the teachings of Christ and the grace of God. To be born anew we must examine the way we have come to understand the world around us and look at it with new eyes. What messages of the world do we believe to be true, and yet are not part of God's realm?

The ways of the world tell us that we must appear to have it all together. That it is more important for people to think you know what you're doing and that you are not

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<sup>4</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, vol. Year B, Volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 46.

struggling with finances or mental illness or relationships, than it is to be authentic and honest. We all do this. And to some degree it is necessary in order to function in the world, but we often miss opportunities for connection and support by pretending we have it all together when we really don't. The realm of God is one of relationship and one that calls us into authenticity. How might we experience a re-birth if we were to shed the façade of "everything's great" and authentically claim our messy and messed up selves?

Too many of our family, friends, and neighbors and indeed many of us gathered here this morning grew up being told that they were stupid or worthless or have experienced violence at the hands of people they should have been able to trust the most. How does that inform one's view of the world and their place in it? This experience of the world may make it difficult to believe that most people aren't trying to hurt you. It might be hard to believe that you are not stupid or worthless. But these are not the truths of God's realm. God has claimed you from the moment you were born as one of her beloved. Made in the image of God as a unique individual who shares a connection to the divine with every other creature in the universe. Bad things happened to you but what happened to you do not make you a bad person. And you don't have to believe the lies anymore. Believe instead in the truth of God's realm and God's unconditional love and grace for all of God's children.

Looking more broadly, we live in a society in which retaliation and punishment is the accepted norm. Whether it is an act of violence or threats by one country to another, or from one human to another, it is expected that if you do the crime you do the time. Taken to the extreme, this paves the way for abhorrent and inhumane treatment of our fellow human beings in the name of deterring future crimes or securing our safety. Imagine if instead of punishment and retaliation, we focused our resources and energy on healing and making sure that every human being was treated like the child of God that they are. We would no longer see immigrant children ripped from their mother's arms in order to deter people from seeking a life free from poverty and violence. We would no longer drop bombs that cause the deaths and displacement of millions of

people and consider it a necessary evil.” We would also realize that we can honor our fallen veterans on Memorial Day and thank living veterans and current members of the armed forces for their service, and still imagine and pray and work toward a reality in which we no longer use military force.

We need a transformation of our whole way of knowing and experiencing the world. A way that is infused with the spirit of God. A way that puts relationship ahead of being first and best. A way that sees people who are different from us in any way as expressions of the vastness of God instead of something to be feared. A way that focuses on forgiveness and healing instead of punishing and retaliating. A way in which we fully embrace our identities as children of God, wonderfully made in the image of the Divine. This transformation was and is the mission of God in Jesus. To save us not from hell, but from being deeply embedded in our way of experiencing the world that does not align with bringing God’s realm on earth. To save us from the lies we tell ourselves about the way the world is and the way it can be. With the help and grace of God, may it be so.