

Born Again?

3/5/2023

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:
John 3:1–17

How many of you have ever heard of being born again? Show of hands. You've heard of being born again. Okay, most everybody has heard of being born again, and I'm going to be talking to you this morning about being born again. Now, you might be wondering why, and there is a little bit of an issue of a translation here, which I will briefly explain to you in our reading this morning. You hear Jesus and Nicodemus talking about being born from above. Well, there's a little bit of a trick to the Greek here that in Greek the way you said, "born again," and the way you say "born from above" are the same way. You can say the same thing both ways. And so Jesus says, you need to be *born from above*. And Nicodemus hears him as saying, you need to be *born again*. And it's been translated both ways. Born again and born from above are both equally legitimate ways to translate this. And you can see in the text there's a little bit of confusion. Which do you mean from above? Or again?

Now you've all heard about being born again. How many people here have known somebody who was a born again Christian? Known somebody who's a born-again Christian? Okay, again, the majority of the room. How many people here consider themselves to be a born-again Christian? Show of hands. A smaller number of us. Now, here's a good question. If you do not consider yourself to be a born-again Christian, how many of you, even though you don't use that label, have felt like you have had a born again experience in your life? Is that a little bit different? Well, that's very interesting. So some more

people are feeling like they can raise their hands for the born-again experience, but maybe not for the born again identity. And that's a little bit of what I want to get into you with this morning.

My thesis this morning is that perhaps the born-again identifier has become a little too strict and narrow in what it means in religion and politics since the 1960s and 1970s. And it's possible that some of us have been turned off by the idea of a born-again experience or of being born again from above, being born of the spirit because that identifier has become so narrow to mean only a certain kind of person, spiritually, religiously, and politically. And we don't feel like we identify with that. And so we say, well, then that whole experience is maybe not for me. And what I'd like to do this morning is maybe just begin to make a little bit more elbow room in what the born-again experience might be, so that we might be able to experience it for ourselves more comfortably without feeling like we necessarily need to be also adhering to a certain set of theological or political beliefs.

I should tell you my story, first of all to get us started. I grew up in a church that was similar to Glen Ridge Congregational Church in many ways. It was a non-denominational Union church that had people from all different backgrounds and nobody was particularly pious at the church I grew up in. It sort of had that mainline feeling to it. But the youth group that I went to growing up was a much more conservative youth group, an evangelical youth group. And it was a wonderful group of people, amazing leaders who really helped me develop my spirituality and understand what it meant to be a Christian and what it meant to have a Christian identity in ways that I didn't always get at my home church—although I got a lot of wonderful things from my home church as well.

And so one of the things that my youth group leaders really wanted for me when I was about the age of 15 or 16, is that they wanted me to have the born again experience because they wanted me to be saved. They cared about me so much they wanted to spend eternity with me, and they did not want me to get left behind. They wanted me up there when God came and took everyone off in the rapture. That is what they believed. They wanted me there. They cared about me that much. And they respected my process, my spiritual process. I was different in my questioning and my thinking than a lot of kids in the youth group. They respected that. They regarded me as an adult in a way, a young adult who could make his own decisions. But they really recommended this experience to me. And there was a good balance in it of guidance and personal choice.

But ultimately what they wanted me to do was to take about 15 minutes and sit down in one of the church's Sunday school classrooms by myself. And they wanted me to pray a particular prayer. And I remember what the prayer was because it was a prayer that was written by Billy Graham and it's the salvation prayer. And this is the prayer that I prayed: Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and I ask your forgiveness. I believe you died from my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite you to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow you as my Lord and Savior in your name. Amen. And when I came out after praying that prayer, I felt different. I felt like I had been given a choice, and I had been allowed to make a commitment to something that was deeply important to me.

It felt like a rite of passage in a culture where we don't have many rites of passage anymore. It felt like I walked out of that room a little bit more myself and a little bit more of an adult, someone who was on a path who had made a commitment. I knew now where I was and that I was choosing to make God a part of my life. And that was a very important thing for me. And it's something that I would recommend to anyone.

And I walked out of that room (I was told) saved! You did it. You are saved. And that is the point, I was told of what I did. You are now a saved person. So you're going up in the rapture. If you die, you're going to heaven. You are saved and everything's taken care of. And the story that I was told is that most Protestants, Protestant Christians in mainline denominations who don't pray this prayer or a prayer similar to it, are not saved. And the vast, vast majority of Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians are also not saved. Let's not even talk about people beyond the boundaries of the Christian faith, but they're not saved because they do not have this born again experience, this personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And that's where I've diverged in my thinking about what it means to be born again. Because you know, Nicodemus, when he goes to meet with Jesus, Jesus isn't asking him to get saved, right? Nicodemus said, "Hey, Jesus I'm getting a good vibe from you here. Everybody knows you're from God. We're seeing what you're doing. We see the signs. This is great." And Jesus didn't say, "Well, don't worry, this is easy. Don't worry. You just say you're going to follow me, and then you're going to be saved forever, and that's all you need to worry about." Instead, Jesus gives him all this mystery, not about praying a specific prayer to get saved, but about being born from above, being reborn in the Spirit. This is not as simple as a prayer. This is a total transformation. If Jesus had said to Nicodemus, "Well, pray this prayer. Go spend 15 minutes downstairs in the Sunday school room and pray this prayer and you're set," I think Nicodemus probably would've done it and not had too many questions.

But that's not what Jesus tells Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "This is big. This is going to be a struggle. This is a transformation. This is about more than salvation." I think that the born again experience, as many Protestants have interpreted it, it's very typically Protestant in that it takes something like salvation, which Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians and much of the Christian tradition would explain through mystery and miracle. and makes it very digestible and transactional. You pray this prayer and you're saved. That's all you need to know. And you don't need to worry about anything in between. That's it. And that is also I think, where I've diverged a little bit in thinking about what it means to be born again. I don't think that Jesus was asking Nicodemus in this passage for some sort of intellectual consent or just a mere commitment to receive a label: You're a Christian now or you're saved now. You know, Nicodemus isn't stupid. If Jesus had just said, look if you want to be saved, you just have to pray this prayer, then Nicodemus would've done that! Nicodemus struggles so much with what Jesus is asking him because Jesus is asking Nicodemus to transform his life right here, right now! His whole life has got to change. Starting now, from above, top to bottom, you will be transformed! Not pray this prayer and in 20 years, when you die, you go off to heaven. "This is the total reordering of your life from top to bottom. You come to me and you say, you have seen? You do not

know anything! You have seen nothing! You must be transformed before you can even say that you see. The utter and total transformation of our lives for Jesus Christ—that is what he is asking for.

Now, I think praying this prayer when I was 15 or 16 years old helped me with that. But I don't think it was the whole enchilada. I don't think that it was everything. And I think that this has become one of my core theological beliefs, which I will share with you now, is that in Christianity, salvation is relatively easy because it's about God's grace. And God is so ready to give everything to save us. But God is asking for more from us than to receive salvation. God is asking us for something very, very hard—the total transformation of our lives here and now, and to be ready for it, to be ready for it. And that is a mystery. And if we're going to do that, it's going to take a miracle way bigger than my commitment can sustain. It's a miracle.

I think that what Jesus is asking us here, and this wonderful phrase, “The wind blows where it chooses <laugh> and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” Jesus is saying, if you want to be born again from the Spirit, you are no longer in charge. I think a good word to describe this would be the word inspiration. Jesus is asking us to lead an inspired life. Now, the word inspiration has perhaps become a little bit too spiritual and a little bit, you know, too much all over everybody's Pinterest boards and like hanging up in every yoga studio and “hashtag inspired.” But what inspiration really means—fundamentally means—is that I am not in charge. It is the wind that blows through me, the thing that is greater than I, that I am going to put first and that is going to lead my life. And for Christians, that's the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ.

And I'll say one last thing because inspiration, if we're being pessimistic, we could say, well, you're just talking about hedonism. Just follow any old whim that comes along. Whatever feels good, whatever feels right to you is what must be right. And just do whatever feels good, and it doesn't matter about the consequences. But I think inspiration for a Christian means following in the way of Jesus Christ who came into this world, not to condemn the world, but to save it. And as we move through life, if we want to be born again, and we want to transform our lives, we want to allow that spirit to get us head to toe, we need to be motivated, not by our own desires, by our own strength, by our own thinking about what is right and what is wrong—what I want and what I'm gonna go get, what my desires are. We need to be motivated by the spirit that moves through us, that is moving us in the direction to be those who follow Christ by also saving the world, serving the world, becoming disciples of the one who saves, never ever to be disciples of the one who condemns. Because when we become disciples of the one who condemns, we are no longer disciples of Jesus Christ. We have to be disciples of the one who saves. Beloved this Lent, let a little bit more of your own ego go and feel the wind. Not I, as D. H. Lawrence said, but the wind that moves through me. And may that wind be, discern it to be, head to toe, the wind of love and service to this world and not of condemnation.