

“Twice Born Christians”
Text: John 3:1-17
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June 7, 2009

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." John 3:5

When I was a young adult attending Sunday school, the most popular and respected book in the curriculum was entitled *The Mighty Acts of God*. After a brief introductory chapter, *Mighty Acts* takes off with a rousing account of creation. Before you know it, you are at the parting of the Red Sea. Soon, manna is falling from heaven. The walls of Jericho are crumbling. Divine judgment is being meted out. The clear, straightforward message of the *Mighty Acts of God* is that God acts, and God acts in history. Peter Gomes, who preaches at Harvard, describes a similar book to the one that I once studied. His seminary favorite was entitled *The God Who Acts*. “This was the God,” Gomes writes, “who sent fire from heaven on behalf of Elijah, and rain too - the God who stopped the mouths of lions for the well-being of Daniel, the God who was capable of anything that suited his will and purpose.” (1)

And so it is that much of the Bible bears witness to a powerful God, whose acts of redemption and judgment determine the course of history and the fate of every human life. Our ancestors in ancient Israel read their holy documents, studied their history, and concluded that theirs was a mighty God who got things done. Naturally, they wanted to please this Holy and Almighty God, before whom even the six-winged seraphim covered their eyes.

Nicodemus was a learned man, steeped in the study of sacred texts, acutely aware of the majesty and sovereignty of the Almighty and eager to know and do the right thing. One night, he came to see Jesus. Why not in broad daylight? Probably because he did not want to be observed visiting the strange, new rabbi in town. A man like Nicodemus was supposed to give answers, not ask questions, but questions were on his mind. He wanted clarification as to what Jesus’ connection with God was. He knew there was a connection. He said, “Nobody can do what you do, unless that person has been sent by God. Right?” Nicodemus wanted a “yes” or “no” answer, so he could put a check in the proper box. Jesus didn’t want to answer Nicodemus; rather, he wanted Nicodemus to stop paddling around in the shallow end of the pool and to go deeper into the meaning of the kingdom of God. He responded to the question with a statement that seemed to veer off in an entirely different direction.

He said to Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Frustrated, Nicodemus asked, "How can you be born after growing old?" I sympathize with Nicodemus; he had come with a simple question, and now, he was hearing nonsense. But Jesus, who had a genius IQ in spiritual sense, pressed on.

"I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and of the Spirit. Do not be astonished at what I'm saying to you. You must be born from above."

Notice that I'm using the phrase "from above", as opposed to the word "again". The words "from above" more clearly reflect the original Greek, and it is an important distinction. The meaning of being born "from above" is that rebirth is accomplished by the renewing power of God. Being reborn is nothing that Nicodemus or any other human can do. God does it. God's own Spirit, like the wind, comes and goes at will, cannot be controlled by human action, by anything other than God's own heart and mind. Jesus is not saying that Nicodemus needs to do anything. Nicodemus needed to be open to the glad news that he did not have to do anything other than receive the transforming love of God.

Lutheran scholar and preacher Barbara Lundblad makes an important observation about this dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. The second time Jesus says to Nicodemus *you need to be born from above*, the word "you" is plural, whereas before, it had been singular referring to Nicodemus alone. Now, it is as if you and I are in the picture, listening in over Nicodemus' shoulder. (2) Standing there in the dark of night, he was hoping for a clearer way to understand God. I hope for that myself. I went to seminary for precisely that reason. So many people then and now who speak about God, or for God, confuse me. I get lost in their ambiguity. Others repel me because of their mean-spiritedness or close-mindedness. Still others reduce the great, mysterious truths about God into little problem-solving slogans. I was in a bookstore the other day and saw a number of self-help books. I can't remember the exact words, but one of them was entitled something like *Five Ways to Love God and Lose Weight*. Maybe I should have bought it - I don't know.

Sometimes I take comfort in the wonderful thought of the poet Rumi: "Beyond all our ideas about wrongdoing, and right doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

In the dark of the night, Nicodemus came to Jesus with a deep question.

Watching German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Obama, and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel pay their respects last Friday at the Buchenwald concentration camp to the 6 million Jews who lost their lives in the Holocaust, I was reminded of how swiftly and subtly night can descend, how it is at night that the deepest questions arise. There is something else that happens when darkness descends. People pull down the shades and thus fail to see anything

except what is happening within their own little worlds. They do not see the suffering that is taking place, and so they fail to act to prevent cruelty and inhumanity, especially if it is happening to those who are not like themselves.

Elie Wiesel was an Orthodox Jewish boy, 16 years old, when his family was taken first to Auschwitz and then to Buchenwald, where his father died. After the prisoners in the camp were liberated by the Allies, Wiesel vowed not speak for 10 years of his experience. When he finally spoke, it was through a book entitled *Night*. In that book, “everything is turned upside down, every human value destroyed.” As one Kapo, that is a prisoner inside the camp who worked for the Nazis, told him, “There are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. Everyone lives and dies for himself alone.”

My favorite story from the Hebrew tradition is of a young rabbinic student who asked his rabbi once how one could discern when night was over and a new day had begun. Was it according to the clock, he wondered. Was it when he heard the first crow of the rooster, or when he could make out with his eyes the silhouette of a tree against the horizon? “None of those,” the rabbi answered. “Until you can look in the eyes of a stranger and recognize him as your brother, recognize her as your sister, then a new day has not dawned, and night has not ended.”

When Nicodemus asked Jesus what God was all about, Jesus answered in terms of transformation. He answered in terms of love. What a shame that this, one of the most beautiful passages in all the Bible about God's transforming power and God's love for all the people of the world, has been used as a weapon to establish superiority or understood as a ticket to get into heaven, rather than as an invitation to be bearers of God's love for the world.

Rabbi Jesus reveals a new way of understanding how God acts. The wind blows where it will. God is free to act when, how, and with whom God wants to act in sovereign love. Overhearing his conversation with Nicodemus, we realize that raw displays of power are no longer the way God intends to be present on this earth. God has chosen love over power. (3) More precisely, God chooses to operate through the power of love. God's mightiest act is God's act of love toward us, in the sending of God's own son. For the sake of divine love, God decided to get into this human mess all the way.

God comes among us in the form of a creature like us, Jesus Christ. Gomes says this means that “all creation, and all men and women, have somehow been elevated to participate in that ultimate act of God, and that the character of that action, both divine and human, must be out of love and compassion. . .” (4)

We are not told what Nicodemus did with the information he received from Rabbi Jesus that night long ago. Maybe he went back home saying, “I don't get this stuff,” but I think he left the conversation, if not a changed man, at least a man in

whom the possibility for transformation had begun to germinate. I believe this, because the next time we see Nicodemus, in fact, the only time we ever see him again, is on the day Jesus was crucified. That day, he didn't give a flip what other people thought. He gathered together a mixture of myrrh and aloes, and he went to Pilate and said, "I want that man's body."

Think of all the people whose lives had been touched by the crucified Rabbi:
the hundreds who had heard him preach
the sinners he had forgiven
the halt, the lame
the friends and enemies

Only one had the privilege of wrapping his body for burial - the grateful Nicodemus whose own life surely had emerged like a butterfly from the cocoon it had been in by means of a strange conversation that turned his own mind inside out and caused him to rethink his categories of what was right and what was wrong, what is possible and what is not possible. (5)

It seems impossible to me that the Palestinians and the Israelis will ever come to the day when they can live side-by-side and at peace, but maybe they can, through the transforming power of God's love released in the world. The President suggested in Cairo last week that the followers of Islam stop measuring their own faith by the rejection of another's faith. Christians ought to take those words to heart ourselves, when we begin to feel superior to others.

I believe with all my heart that to be Christian is not to act or feel better than anyone else, but rather in the spirit of Jesus, to honor the image of God in everyone we meet, to treat others with civility and fairness. No, I do not believe all religions are equal. Yes, I believe that Jesus is Savior and Lord of all, the unique revelation of God's nature and will on earth, but I pray that in the 21st century, we can avoid the condition first identified by Jonathan Swift, several centuries ago when he wrote, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

To commit your life to Christ is to acknowledge that you are a sinner, saved by grace, not that you have attained salvation because of what you believe about the divinity of Jesus Christ. God's action, not human choice, is the operative power in the matter of salvation. Salvation is an act of God, who loves the world and its people to the point of death on the cross. If God is like that, and if I have been baptized into the story of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ, shouldn't I act more out of love than judgment? When God chose to enter the world in human form, God chose to do so, first through Jesus, and then, can you believe it - through us! (6) I believe the rise of atheism in our day is to some degree the result of a lot of people who see other people who say they love Christ but do absolutely nothing to live out that love or to show that love, or to embody that love. I'm glad I'm preaching this sermon on Pick-a-Pan Sunday. At Morningside, we are trying to do what we can to act in this world as God's agents.

I believe that ordinary people are born again into a living faith. For some, it happens all at once, in a dramatic moment, a unique sense of divine intervention. But for most of us, it's more of a matter of listening over other people's shoulders, of wrestling with doubts, of finding ourselves saying Yes when we are asked to help out. Gradually, day by day, year by year, we discover that we have really become part of what God is doing in the world by doing what needs to be done. I'm not talking just about church work. I am talking about what you do in the world, the way you live out your vocational life, the way you treat other people.

I got an e-mail yesterday from one of our members bring me up to date about our Afghani family - four kids, all of them under 6 - 3 girls and one boy, a mom, a dad, refugees from Afghanistan, all Muslim. The e-mail informed me that one of you has given that family a car, and another one of you has helped with the severe back problem the dad has. You have taken them shopping and bought them clothes and befriended them. One of you has even brought over some tomato plants. *For God so loved the world. . . We love the world by doing what God would do.*

When we come to the Lord's table, we realize that God is fully invested in what is happening on this earth that is our home. We eat the bread and remember God's great love not only for us, but for all people. We are re-energized for the making of our witness to God's saving love wherever we can. How do we do it? As John Wesley recommended: "Do all the good that you can, by all the means that you can, in every place that you can, at all times that you can, to all people that you can, for as long as you can." Not a bad way to organize your day.

Someone wise once said, "The question for Christians is not 'how can I be saved', not 'have I been born again' but 'how can God be glorified [by me]?" (7)

(1) Peter Gomes, *Sermons-Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1998, p.177-179.

(2) "Trusting the Wind," Day 1.

(3) Gomes.

(4) Gomes.

(5) Gail R. O'Day, *The Word Disclosed*, CBP Press, St. Louis, 1987, p. 28.

(6) Gomes.

(7) Leslie Newbigin.