

“Born Again?”
John 3:1-17
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This passage from John is full of the familiar. How many times have you heard the well-known phrases of what Martin Luther called the gospel in miniature? “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” If you didn’t memorize that verse sometime in Sunday School, you’ve seen “John 3:16” sign held up at enough sporting events that it’s second nature by now. As is the phrase “you must be born again.” Have you ever been asked that question? Are you born again? For a large fraction of western Christianity, there is a belief that one must go through a second birth, in order to be saved. And as Nicodemus noted, that sounds crazy. How can anyone be born after having grown old? And who would want to?

I have to admit that I don’t remember being born. I guess I was too young at the time. But almost 30 years ago this spring Erin and I drove the 50 miles from our home to the hospital in Dodge City, Kansas to welcome our son Brandon into the world. I had no idea how difficult it would be. Because Erin’s labor would be induced they gave her an IV with a drug to start labor. Through a long night, I watched her endure the pain of a difficult labor, hooked up to all kinds of monitors and tubes and finally at 8:00 on June 5th, Brandon was born. Erin soon fell asleep and I fell back exhausted and remember thinking to myself, “Never again. That is just too hard.” It’s not just the work, not just the pain, but selfishly, it is so difficult watching someone you love go through that kind of pain. Birth is a messy, difficult, painful, heart wrenching process.

It’s strange that Jesus chooses that image for what is supposed to happen in the Christian life. If Jesus had said to me on that morning of June 5th, 1987, that this was what was supposed to happen now to me as I became his follower, I would have walked away. I don’t want the Christian life to be painful or difficult or heart wrenching. I want it to be safe and warm and loving and protected. In other words, I want to stay in the womb. So does Nicodemus. When he spoke to Jesus, Jesus indicated to him that his

faith is still to immature. It hasn't been born into the real world yet. It must be brought out of the dark into the light, into a sometimes harsh world, but one where it can grow into a mature faith that not only can accept love and protection, but provide them to others.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, that he must be born from above, we have most often read that as a command. This is what we have to do. But maybe it's an invitation. Maybe God is telling Nicodemus that God wants to be working in his life and that to let the Spirit guide him into new life is like being born again. Not always nice and clean, often difficult and messy, that that's where real life comes from. Maybe that's what "born again" means, letting God give birth to something new within us. And new life, new ways of living are not easy and don't always go the ways we expect.

It would be easier to avoid this whole birth thing, wouldn't it? Can't we just stay how we are? But as Deborah Kapp says: "God works hard for us and our faith. God conceives us as Christians and nurtures us in the wombs of our faith, safe and warm and secret. At some point like any pregnant woman who is close to full term, God gets impatient with gestation and wants to get on with it; God wants to push that baby through the birth canal into greater maturity, into fullness of life, into a faith lived wholly in the world. . . Jesus thinks it is time Nicodemus came through that spiritual birth canal. Perhaps he thinks it is time for many others to be reborn too." Maybe us.

What would mature faith look like in us, in this congregation? Would we speak honestly with love to one another, unconcerned about our agenda but seeking the best for each other? Would we be strong enough to approach another and ask for forgiveness even though it is hard and embarrassing and makes us look bad? Would we be able to forgive even though it might make us look weak or vulnerable and make us give up our grudges? Would we step out and welcome someone we don't know? Would we even seek out a person of another faith or race or orientation or economic condition, just to be of service not for what someone can do for us? Would we recognize that our building, our budget, even our staff that make our church a comfortable place are not ends in themselves but are tools to

accomplish the mission of God 's kingdom, maybe even when doing God's work puts those things at risk? It is not easy for birth to happen, for new things to come into the world. Nicodemus discovered this. We don't hear from him after this discussion in the garden at night. At least not until later in John's gospel. Nicodemus comes back later, with his friend Joseph of Arimathea, on Good Friday. It is these two men who, after Jesus has been crucified, that they have his broken, bloody dead body taken taken down off the cross and they carry him away, making themselves ceremonially unclean in the process. But they clean the blood and the spittle and whatever else off his body and they lay him out and anoint him with ointment and wrap him in clean cloths for his burial and then they lay Jesus in a tomb and roll the stone closed. A messy, bloody business. But one that needs to happen for something new to come into the world.