

The Church of the Good Shepherd

Lexington, Kentucky

Sermon for The Second in Lent

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If I were to ask those of you here this morning who have had what we have come to call a “born again” experience to raise your hands, I wonder what it would look like. Did you know that almost half of Americans 18 years and older claim to be “born again” believers? I suspect some of you would raise your hand if you were asked; “do you want to be born again?” And, a few of you might say, “I’ve never had the experience and am not expecting to have it and don’t particularly want to.” What does it mean and how important is it?

The term “born again” derives from this week’s gospel – the nocturnal dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus on being born anew. When we are presented with this scene, we have to deal with the issue of the birth of the spirit whether we really want to or not. It is clear from this encounter that being born again is at the heart and soul of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ came to change people. New birth brings new life. The first Christians obviously wanted to experience this new life, to share it with others, and to participate in it fully.

Paul Tillich, one of the towering theological figures of the last century, says the same thing in different words. Tillich wrote in a book of his, “The New Being,” “If I were asked to sum up the Christian message . . . in two words, I would say . . . it is the message of a ‘New Creation’.”

One day a friend came to the famous artist, James Whistler and asked for some advice about how to hang a beautiful painting he had recently acquired in Paris. He explained that he could not make the painting fit into the room where he planned to display it. To that problem, Whistler replied, “Man, you are beginning at the wrong end. You can’t make the painting fit the room. You have to make the room fit the painting!” It is this way with being “born again.” New birth is not just rearranging a few details in our lives. It is the process of becoming a new person. It is an essential process if we want to experience the abundant life Jesus came to offer. But you still may ask, with Nicodemus, “how can I be born again?” I’d like to explore that question with you this morning.

The new birth begins when we recognize the need for a change to come about in our lives. It isn’t easy to see ourselves as we really are, especially if we think everything is going really well. There’s a bit of Nicodemus in each one of us. He was a good man, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedran, which made him prominent, and a leading member of Jewish society. He came to Jesus under the cover of darkness. We see in him a problem many of us have faced or face in our lives: The problem of the one who wants to be changed and yet who cannot. Nicodemus is one very close to entering the Realm of God. And Jesus patiently attempts to nudge him over the edge by telling him “no one can see the Kingdom of God unless that one is born again.” In that encounter, Jesus attempts to direct the attention of Nicodemus to the God who loves him and then concludes with these daring words that illustrate the dimensions of that love: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, to the end that all those who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”- the whole gospel in a capsule.

In my home state of Texas, we are entering the time of the year when we celebrate Texas Independence. One of the most prominent figures in that struggle for self-government was Sam Houston. A tall, striking, enigmatic man, Sam Houston had been Governor of Tennessee and Andrew Jackson’s protégé. There are those who say that he might have become President of the U.S. had it not been for an unfortunate and mysterious marital crisis. Sam Houston and Eliza Allen had been married only three months when she left him and returned to her family’s home in Gallatin. Houston would never explain what happened and threatened to kill any man who uttered a word against her.

He left Tennessee for the Arkansas Territory and there he lived among the Cherokees. While there, he received a letter from Pres. Jackson intimating that he was under the impression Houston had gone there to be a missionary to the Cherokees. Houston replied that he “lacked the evangelical change of heart” which was necessary for such an undertaking. For 25 years, Sam Houston prayed for this new birth experience. As great a statesman as he was, as fine a general as he proved to be, he knew there was something in his soul that needed changing and that until it happened, his life and destiny would not be complete. And it did happen, finally. The process of being born again always begins with the recognition that inner change is needed.

The next step in spiritual rebirth is the recognition that only God is powerful enough to bring about the change. This insight, of course, springs from the realization that we have tried to get control of our lives so often and so often we have failed. I cannot save myself. The task is too great. All the self-help tapes in the world will ultimately fail unless I have God at work in my life supplying the energy of transformation. The new creature I seek to become must always be the new creature God wants me to be. This requires trust - an enormous amount of trust.

Abraham is the model for trusting God. God called him to leave the security of home and heritage and got to a land he'd never seen before. Abraham was willing to leave all that because he believed that what God had in store was better for him than anything he'd ever known.

There are so many sources of security to which we have attached ourselves. We think we are happy with what we've accumulated. And then we lose it all and we see how much unhappiness we feel. But what if we entered a place of security and peace which could never be taken away? This would be true happiness - the Kingdom of God - eternal life. The only way we can have it is to receive it as a gift from the One who knows us better than we know ourselves.

What do I have to do to be born again? What did you do when you experienced physical birth? Probably not much at all. Your mother did most of the work and thereby gave you life. Paul says the whole creation is groaning in labor waiting for the children of God to be birthed. God who is as much our mother as our father desires to give us new life. What is required of us is to trust God with the process and the results. Trust leads us up to the gateway. God's grace grants us entrance.

Finally, once we've experienced this new birth, we have to continually be open to growth. Have you ever known anyone who tells about being born again year after year but never seems to have experienced anything after the event? You want to ask, “Is there life after rebirth?” Just because you've experienced the grace of God in a spiritual birth doesn't mean you have it all sewed up. We have to grow toward maturity in our faith. That's because there will be problems along the way. We Anglicans call this process of growth in grace “Sanctification.”

Psychologists tell us that by the time we're 21-22 year of age, our personalities are formed. After that, not much change usually occurs. We may consciously adjust or adapt our behavior. But when we get under stress, we tend to return to familiar behavior patterns. The test of our growth in grace comes during times of stress. During those times we need to avail ourselves of all the means of grace as if our very life depended on them, because it does.

Abraham's trail is dotted with altars like the one described in today's reading from the Hebrew scriptures. He built one wherever he had an encounter with God. From that time to this we see that god's way is not to change our hearts and then leave us alone. God desires to continue to change us and shape us and form us into the image of the new creature. All that's needed on our part is that we have the same desire. Do you want to be born again?