

## Born Again

Have you heard it in your Monday through Saturday lives?

Have you been asked if you are?

Have you told someone you are?

Have you wondered what it means?

Have you Googled it?

"Born Again," that is.

Kindly raise your hand if you have been "born again."

Now, if you are baptized, please raise your hand.

Later on, we'll do this again, and see if anything changes.

In the tradition of the church, for nearly 2000 years, to be "born again" means "to be baptized."

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan and when he came up out of the water, there was the Holy Spirit, looking for all the world like a white dove.

The very next verse in John's gospel after today's reading tells of Jesus and his disciples joining John in baptizing people.

It's the only time in all four gospels where we are told that Jesus himself baptized people.

So, from the very beginning, to be born again means to be baptized.

So says Justin Martyr in 151 AD: "As many as are persuaded and believe what we [Christians] teach and say is true are brought to where there is water and are regenerated ... for Christ also said, 'Unless you are born again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.'"

So says Cyprian in 252, recalling that when those becoming Christian "receive also the baptism of the church ... then finally can they be fully sanctified ... since it is written 'Except a man be born again of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'"

If you are baptized, you are born again!

And so, hands again please, who has been born again?

I know today that to be "born again" has become an almost militant slogan for one brand of evangelical Christianity.

Countless people have been accosted on airplanes or street corners with the demand: "Are you born again?"

Meaning, quite often, a highly personal, individualized, conversion experience.

In the earliest days of the church, the phrase to be "born again" meant to be baptized.

And both the cleansing water with its gift of the Spirit AND interior transformation were always included in what it means to

be "born again"; because, in the early days, it took at least 3 years of training in the Christian faith to be eligible for baptism.

Soldiers and actors and many other folks had to walk away from their professions before they are admitted into the life of Christ.

They had to, for 3 years, care for the poor, the sick, the outcast, to demonstrate they "got it" before they could be baptized.

Interior conversion met with exterior baptism; a change of heart kissed the water of the Spirit.

But as time went on, and Christianity became the faith of the empire, the water of baptism was often poured over those with very little sense of what a Christian life looks like, and the transformation our faith calls us to was often left behind in the dust of calling oneself a Christian without having a clue as to what it means to be a Christian.

Perhaps that is why in more recent times there has been such a move toward intense, personal experiences of God, in an effort to recapture the life changing reality of our faith.

Those intense, life altering moments are, however, as old as scripture: whether it is Moses coming face to face with the burning bush, or Abram being told by the Living God to pack it all up and move from everything he knew so that God could make something new out of him, to Paul, knocked to the ground by blinding light so that he could finally see.

All of this is backdrop and context for Jesus' strange encounter today with Nicodemus, an encounter which left Nicodemus scratching his head.

Jesus explains to a man who thinks he knows so much about God that in fact he knows nothing.

The word in Greek is *anōthen*. It has no English translation because *anōthen* means two things at the same time. It means "again" as in "born again."

But it also means "from above" as in "born from above."

Both of these ideas live in this one word.

The sense "from above" speaks of baptism by water and the Spirit, in other words, God acting on you, on me, and changing our prejudices, our best thinking, our certainties and our judgments.

The sense to be "born again" speaks to our response to God's acting upon you, upon me, and our willingness to surrender our prejudices, our best thinking, our certainties and our judgments.

Both senses are included in Jesus' words today.

Nicodemus doesn't get it. He flattens out the word and asks about crawling back into the womb.

But what Jesus is pushing Nicodemus to see is that we cannot know God until we know Jesus, and we cannot know Jesus until we sign up with his cause, walk in the way he leads, and accept the likelihood of crucifixion as the natural consequence of obedience to God.

Where that obedience takes us is anyone's guess.

"The wind blows where it will", says Jesus, and God will have his way with us if only we will allow it.

And so we are called to be flexible (as in "blessed are the flexible, they shall not get bent out of shape"), and we are called to go, knowing not where the journey ends.

While we may long for certainty and stability, with keeping things the way they have always been, alas, that is not the nature of the Living God.

Ours is a God who teaches in parables, not in rules, a God "willing to live with wasted seed, with nets full of good and bad fish, with fields that sprout both weeds and wheat, who says no to violence, who says no to forcing people to be or do or think one thing. Ours is a God who loves us in our messiness." W. Willimon, *Postmodern Preaching*.

When we hear strange, ambiguous readings like today, our job is not to grasp it or dissect it or break it down, so as to get it right.

We live in an age of grasping, dissecting, breaking down, and getting things right.

The results of those efforts are bloody wars, growing chasms between rich and poor, abandoned children, and forgotten elderly.

There is another way.

Let us instead sit with the Word and let the Word grasp us, let the Word dissect us, let it break us down so that instead of trying to "get it right" perhaps the Word will "get us right."

Have you been born again?

Say "yes" if you've been baptized.

Say "yes" if you've encountered God on your journey and he has shaken you to your roots.

Say "yes" to the God who says "yes" to us, every day of our lives.

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