

For the people of St. Philip's
Lent 2 - Feb 17, 2008
John 3:1-17
Maria Hoecker, preacher

The seasons of Lent and Easter in what we call "Year A" of the three-year lectionary cycle of Sunday readings serves us up with a large helping of readings from the Gospel of John. I don't know if you are aware of this, but the Revised Common Lectionary suggests readings for each Sunday in a three year cycle, and for the most part, in Year A we read through Matthew, in Year B, Mark, and in Year C, Luke, with sprinklings of John thrown in from time to time.

In Year A, however, we have something like 13 Gospel passages from John between now and Pentecost Sunday. Historically, The Gospel of John was the last one written. It probably didn't reach its final literary form until near the year 100 AD. It was also the Gospel least concerned with telling a historically accurate or chronological history of the life and teachings of Jesus, the way the other three Gospels do. In fact, the author of John states its purpose this way: *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."* (John 20:31) So this is a spiritual and theological testament of faith, intended to help people enter into the meaning and mystery of Jesus Messiah.

That's why a lot of the sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel sound more like sermons than like conversations. Sometimes they're theological treatises put in Jesus' mouth. It is a book chock full of signs and secrets and symbolism. Someone has said that the Gospel of John is "Shallow enough for a child to wade in, and deep enough to drown an elephant."

Today's Gospel passage, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, contains some of the best known and probably most contentious verses in all of the Gospels.

- *"No one can see the Kingdom of heaven without being born again."*
- *"No one can enter the Kingdom of heaven without being born of water and spirit."*
- *"God so loved the world that he gave the only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life."*

Some branches of Christendom have taken these texts as proof positive that only "born again" Christians will get into heaven, or that everyone who does not accept the Christian Bible and take Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior is condemned to perish. ----"See," the believers say, "it says so right here!"----

I would like to address a few of the issues that are raised for me when Christians use the "born again" language of this passage in an exclusive or exclusionary way. Sometimes literalists reading this passage suggest that even life-long Christian believers aren't really Christian, or aren't going to be saved, if they can't name and claim

a specific "born again" experience in their lives. So being born again is something that Christians better work on or strive for, if they're going to "make the cut."

I propose that such an understanding completely misses the meaning of the passage. We can say "Jack built the house" or "the house was built by Jack" but in both cases, Jack is the builder, and the house is the passive object, the product of Jack's creative work. When we say "the house must be built by Jack", we still don't expect the house to do anything on its own, or to take responsibility for its own production.

So those who would imply that being born again, or being born from above is something we do, a conversion

experience we accomplish or a spiritual summit we attain, have it backwards. Being born from above is an act of God, which we experience as the grace of God transforming us. So also, we are not saved because we believe. We are saved because God so loved the world, God so *loves* the world. We and all of creation are a magnificent work in progress. When we receive and recognize that marvelous news, we know better what eternal life is, and perhaps can more fully enter its beauty. But it isn't *us* who make it happen. God is what makes it all happen. Like a mighty rush of wind, God's Holy Spirit gives us life and movement.

There is also the question of why some Christians have such a strong experience of a "born again" moment in their lives, while others can't name or remember such a moment at all, even if they're faithful lifetime believers. Here is a useful insight about this from a minister in Muskogee Oklahoma-- she wrote,

"A baby colt is born and at a very young age has a blanket put on him.

He learns to walk around with the blanket,

and as he grows the blanket gets larger and heavier.

In time a saddle is put on him, and he becomes a saddle horse.

One day he meets a new horse in the corral.

It is a young mustang that has been recently broken.

The mustang asks - exactly when did you become a saddle horse?

The saddle horse says - I have always been a saddle horse,

since the day I was born.

The mustang is surprised because he can remember the exact day he was broken

and the day he gave up the wild,

and the day he started to respond to the master's voice.

Who is the true saddle horse? Is one a better saddle horse than the other?"

One church member has a profound conversion experience that turns her life around.

Another member says, "I have always been a Christian since the day I was born.

I went to Sunday School and was confirmed and then became a church leader."

Is the 'born again' believer, who can remember the day of salvation

a better or worse believer than the one who has been a believer all her life?

That's why I believe that using the words of Jesus as a touchstone for excluding people from eternal life seems like a complete perversion of the text. When was I saved? December 22, 1962. I was two months old. That was the day I was baptized. Everything that's happened before and since has been pure Grace from God.

Such is the experience of being born of water and spirit. Such an experience is captured in the biblical images of the returned prodigal son, welcomed home from exile--- the transformation the healed demoniac, restored to his right mind and his community, who becomes an evangelist--- the life of the woman once stooped with disease, standing straight and restored to health, no longer an outcast---the wonder of the man blind from birth, whose eyes are opened to see the world, and recognize the Messiah--- the experience of Lazarus, called out from his tomb, and brought back to life.

It is the experience of a love freely given beyond any question of merit-- a peace that passes all understanding--- a healing we never dreamed possible-- a forgiveness that wipes the slate clean, and saves us from all condemnation.

It is through experiences such as these that people begin to glimpse the Kingdom of God, and in some manner even enter the Kingdom of God. Because of the touch of the Spirit, bringing our spirits to birth, our own vision is transformed, our hearts are emboldened, and we dare begin to love others as we have been loved, to treat others as we have been treated, invite others as we have been invited.. Through this powerful gift of God's abundant love, we are humbled, and privileged, and grateful to enter the Kingdom of God.