

Born Again?

23rd Weekend after Pentecost – November 11/12, 2006

Sermon Background Study

John 3:1-10,16 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Do you trust Jesus completely, in all things? If so, you have been born from above, of water and spirit. You are a new creation, remade from top to bottom. You have entered the kingdom of God and eternal life is yours.

In the night

Nicodemus was a Pharisee¹ and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a man from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus’ world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry² for

The Gospel of John

John’s gospel bears little resemblance to the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Very few of the events in the synoptics are found in John’s gospel, which also has very little in the way of ethical teachings such as we find in the Sermon on the Mount.

In the synoptics, miracles are a means for Jesus to enact the reality of God’s kingdom. In John’s gospel, the miracles are signposts to Jesus’ identity and nature. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus’ true identity is often a secret to be protected until the right time. In John’s gospel, Jesus’ glory is revealed from the very beginning. For example, Jesus’ first miracle is the changing of water into wine. John tells us, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (2:11).

Here are a few ideas to keep in mind as you read John’s Gospel. First, John emphasizes that God’s kingdom has come already! Jesus says “Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed” (3:17) and “anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life” (5:24). As Richard Hays notes, this means that “for those in the believing community, eternal life is now.” The glory of God’s kingdom is fully revealed and present in Jesus.

Second, the immediate reality of God’s kingdom is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever” (14:15). This Advocate/Helper is the Holy Spirit.

Finally, in this community of faith, we are called to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. Rather than give us long passages of Jesus’ teachings, John gives us, for example, the enacted parable of Jesus’ washing the disciples feet (chapter 13), leading us to see Jesus’ sacrificial love on the cross several chapters later.

One of my winter St. Academy classes will be on the Gospel of John. The class will be offered twice, Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings. Winter classes will begin the week of Jan 8. On-line registration for all the classes will be available by Dec 15 at www.standrewacademy.org.

¹The Pharisees were an important group of Jews for nearly two centuries before the destruction of the temple in 70AD. The Pharisees were committed to the careful keeping of God’s Law and waited, with great anticipation, for the coming of the Messiah, God’s kingdom, and the bodily resurrection of the dead. In their religious lives, some Pharisees followed a path of piety while others pursued political, even revolutionary, agendas.

²The temple in Jerusalem was the centerpiece of the Jewish religion. During Passover, the great celebration of liberty and salvation, the temple and its courtyards were turned into a charnal house as thousands of Jews came to purchase animals that would then be slaughtered by the temple priests in sacrificial rituals.

a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. “Who is he?” the crowds asked. Nicodemus wondered himself. Feeling his heart strangely warmed and his mind perplexed, Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn’t just walk up to him. He had a reputation to protect. Already, some of the Pharisees were talking about the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night – so no one would know.³

“Born from above” or “Born again”

V. 3 in today’s passage gave us the phrase “born-again Christian.” The Greek word here, *anōthen*, can mean either “from above” or “again.” Nicodemus takes Jesus to mean “again” for he asks how someone could revisit Mom’s womb and be born a second time. Yet, Jesus insists to Nicodemus that this new beginning, this regeneration is the work of the Spirit, who comes from above.¹

Though John’s other uses of *anōthen* in the gospel all clearly mean “from above,” here he almost certainly has in mind a double meaning, as John does with some other words when there is a point to be made. Christians are both “born again” and “born from above.”

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are made new. Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ – new creation! The old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are “born of God” and have “become children of God” (John 1:12-13). This generation of new life is a complete, total, radical transformation of our whole being. “Born again” is an apt and dramatic analogy.

But this new birth is also a birth “from above.” This is God’s work, specifically the work of the Holy Spirit. When we come to faith in Jesus, God’s Spirit, dwells in us. Paul writes, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Paul isn’t talking about going to your fitness club or staying on your diet. “Body” (*soma* in the Greek) refers to the total, whole person.

The second birth is a birth from God, “from above.” And it is a birth given to all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, who trust him completely. The phrase “born-again Christian” is redundant. All Christians have been born again and from above.

1. In the cosmology of the ancients, the gods lived “up there,” in the heavens. From there, the gods could look down on the lives of the humans. The ancient Jews believed that we could speak of God as being “up there,” literally, God the Most High. Thus, when Jesus returns to the Father (Acts 1), he ascends to the “above.” Likewise, the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples on Pentecost, coming from “above.”

Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived. Still, he wondered, what did Jesus really mean by, “You must be born from above.” Jesus had even seemed amazed that Nicodemus had *not* understood these things! How was Nicodemus to make sense of what Jesus told him? How are we?

Born of water and Spirit

Jesus berates Nicodemus for not understanding when he should (v. 10). After all, he is a Pharisee, a supposed expert in Hebrew Scripture. Nicodemus should understand that when Jesus speaks of being “born of water and Spirit” he is calling on common OT imagery of cleansing repentance and God’s life-giving spirit being poured out on the people of God (see esp. Ezekiel 36:25-27).⁴ Jesus isn’t speaking to Nicodemus about Christian baptism, as is often supposed. How could Nicodemus be expected to understand a practice that didn’t even exist yet? Further, entry into the kingdom is not given or denied on the basis of baptism.⁵ Jesus wants Nicodemus to grasp that being part of God’s people and their entry into God’s kingdom, had never been about what Nicodemus had most valued: the Law, circumcision, the temple, the land. Instead, it had always been and still was about faith, faith that was possible only after the radical transformation, the rebirth, brought by the Spirit of God.

When we are “born of water and the Spirit,” when we are cleansed and given new life, the transformation is total, reaching into every part of our being. This is not about adding something to us that was lacking. It is not about fixing something that was broken. It is not about any incremental approach. Rather, it is about our complete and utter rebirth, regeneration, re-creation.

Granted, we often don’t act like the born-from-above people of God, a bit like a child who isn’t acting his age. But the Spirit works with each of us so that as we mature in Christ, our thoughts, words, and actions increasingly conform to the new person God has created. All this, because God loves us so much that he gave his only Son on that cross, so we might be offered the new birth of water and the Spirit.

³Obviously, I’m using a little informed imagination to flesh out the portrait of Nicodemus. Also, every time John refers to “night” in his gospel, it is a reference to spiritual darkness. Nicodemus is living in the darkness as he comes to confront the light that is Jesus.

⁴See D.A. Carson’s highly regarded commentary on John in the Pillar NT Commentary series.

⁵I better illustrate what I mean. Imagine an adult who has never been baptized and comes to faith in Christ, yet is killed on his way to his own baptism. Or the infant who dies before her baptism. Would we really imagine that Jesus would turn away either of these? Baptism is a gift from God intended for all the people of God, but it is not some sort of magic ticket which must be punched or all is lost.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

November 12 ~ 18

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday John 7-9; Psalm 138 Jesus heads to Jerusalem and to conflict; Jesus heals a blind man</p>	<p>Monday John 10-12; Psalm 139 Jesus is the good shepherd; Jesus raises Lazarus (Lazarus is resuscitated, not resurrected); Jesus is the resurrection and the life</p>
<p>Tuesday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Wednesday John 13-15; Psalm 140 Jesus' washing of his disciples feet is an enacted parable; Jesus foretells Peter's betrayal but seeks to comfort his disciple with the promise of the Holy Spirit</p>
<p>Thursday John 16-18; Psalm 141 Jesus' farewell address; his arrest and trial</p>	<p>Friday John 19-21; Psalm 142 Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection</p>
<p>Saturday Daniel 1-3; Psalm 143 Daniel's story is meant to encourage those who are being pressured to worship other gods or to weaken their commitment to God.</p>	

Sermon Notes

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have Fellowship Groups meeting now and will be adding more this fall. There are also a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewccl.org.

Books that would make good Christmas gifts

I've been making book recommendations for almost three years. Here are a few that I think would make good Christmas gifts to friends and family. *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore, still has copies of these.

The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible, Ed. Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, et al

Talking the Walk, by Marva Dawn

Prayer, by Philip Yancey

Finding God in the Questions, by Dr. Timothy Johnson

The Jesus I Never Knew, by Philip Yancey

Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision, by Paul Wesley Chilcote

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is your reaction to the phrase "born-again Christian?" What do you think it means? How would you react to someone calling you a born-again Christian? Do you understand why I say it is redundant? Why do you think it is so popular if it is redundant? How do you think "born-again Christian" came to mean something different from just a "regular" Christian? You might even talk about other popular redundancies, such as "committed Christian" and "Bible-believing Christian." What are some others? Why do we use them?
2. The focus of this study is not on baptism, but I bet that when you read about being "born of water and the Spirit," you thought of baptism. Though this is probably not what Jesus means, it is an understandable connection. What do you think baptism accomplishes? How would you convey to someone that all Christians are to be baptized, but that it is not a requirement for entry into the kingdom (verse 5)? Do my illustrations in the page two footnote make sense to you? Why or why not?
3. In the closing paragraphs of the study, I try to make the point that being "born from above," as is the case for all Christians, is not about adding something we lack or improving us or fixing us. It isn't even a complete makeover. Maybe a do-over is closer to the idea. As Paul puts it, we are "new creations – everything old has passed away, everything has become new." How might we make this new birth seem more concrete to us, more real? How do we proceed with making our thoughts, words, and actions conform to the born-from-above us? How do we avoid letting this slip into some variant of another self-help scheme? What are some practices we could engage in that would help us become the people into whom God has already made us?