

“Born Anew”

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¹⁷If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. ¹⁸You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ²⁰He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. ²¹Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

²²Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

²⁴For “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, ²⁵but the word of the Lord endures forever.” That word is the good news that was announced to you. (1 Peter 1: 17-25)

At the outset, I want to acknowledge that some of us – perhaps many of us – are a little uncomfortable with the term “born again.” On the plus side, it is a phrase used by Jesus himself. In the gospel of John, Nicodemus was a Jewish leader, a Pharisee, who had been drawn to Jesus by the authenticity and depth of his teaching. But he was still searching, still trying to figure out what Jesus was all about. He also stood to lose a lot if his interest in Jesus became public. So Nicodemus came to Jesus one night, under the cover of darkness, hoping to get some clarity.

Jesus understood why Nicodemus was nervous, but he also sensed an earnest, hopeful curiosity. Nicodemus was amazed not only by what Jesus was teaching, but by the miraculous things he was doing. “*Rabbi,*” Nicodemus said, “*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.*”

And Jesus answered, “*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*”

Nicodemus was thrown by this answer, so it is not surprising that we might be too. Nicodemus got lost in literalism, thinking Jesus was talking about an actual return to the womb. Jesus made it clear right away that he was not talking about a physical rebirth, but about a spiritual one. More contemporary triggers are more cultural than biological. In our society, “born again” Christians have typically been stereotyped as having a certain kind of charisma, adhering to a certain kind of politics, or expressing a certain kind of “in your face” spirituality. If those descriptions do not apply to us, we recoil a bit. “If that is what being a Christian is,” we might think, “then maybe it’s not for me.”

And yet, in the first epistle of Peter, first century believers in the expanding Christian world are being told that to be “born again” is something that all followers of Christ are meant to embrace – at least in some way. So this morning, if possible, I’d like to try and reframe this term as something we can all embrace. Let’s not get hung up on being “born again.” Let’s follow the lead of this passage, and think about what it might mean to be “born anew.”



I've always thought it was cool that some of the key scenes in the movie "Big" were filmed just up the road at Rye Playland. One of them is when Tom Hanks' character Josh is making his wish on the Zoltar machine, his wish to go back and be a 13-year-old kid again. His only hesitation is that he has to leave his new girlfriend, his first girlfriend, behind. "Maybe you could come with me," he says to her.

Her response is an emphatic "No." Josh asks her why. He does not understand.

"I've been there before." She says. "It's hard enough the first time." Anyone who has gone through the growing pains of puberty understands that answer well. The lessons we learn during those years are critically important, but many of them are painful. Some of them are heartbreaking.

Even so, how many times have you asked yourself, "If I could only go back and try that again..."? Maybe you said something you wish you hadn't said. Maybe you bombed a big test because you stayed out too late or studied the wrong material. Maybe there was a big fork in the road of your life and you realized, a little too late, that you had chosen the wrong path. Kenny Rogers and Gladys Knight were very different musicians, but back in the 80's the power of regrets like these brought them together for a memorable duet. "*If we knew then what we know now,*" they sang, "*we'd have found a way [to work it out] somehow.*"

That is how I understand the idea of being "born again." It's not a public altar call, at least it does not have to be. It's not a specific prayer that has to include certain words in order to be effective. It is a realization that, because of the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are given the chance to do things differently. It is an awareness of a spiritual reawakening -- a spiritual rebirth -- in which an old way of doing things, which really wasn't helping us that much, is washed away and we get a do-over -- a second chance to do things right.

To be born anew is to have a new mind. It is the same thing Paul was talking about when he told the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."¹ In faith, we are given new eyes that see the world differently, new ears that hear the cries of the world differently, a new way of understanding that sets goals differently.

To be born anew is also to be given a new heart. We won't just read the Word of God to have it go in one ear and out the other. As God said through the prophet Jeremiah, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."²

Or as we read in the New Testament, our lives will become letters, letters from Christ to the world, "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts."³

When this happens, the epistle of Peter says, we will "*have genuine mutual love...*" and we will finally "*love one another deeply and truly from the heart.*" To be born anew is to live into that kind of heart.

And last but not least, to be born anew is to receive a new spirit. It is to finally receive what King David, who knew what a moral mess he was, begged for and prayed for when he

¹ Romans 12:2.

² Jeremiah 31:33.

³ 2 Corinthians 3:3.

cried out, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”⁴ A spirit that is born anew lives differently, with new gratitude for God’s gift of grace... and a renewed commitment to live a life that is obedient to God’s word, a life that serves the good and stands up for what is right.

Our guide for finding this renewal is the Word of God. Scripture gives us new insight, new knowledge, new ways of viewing the world. The Holy Spirit guides us with the roadmap laid out by the Bible’s wisdom. It is the source of new life... the key to our second chance... the door that we open to see things that we wish we knew earlier.

This is what I think Jesus meant, and Paul meant, and Peter meant when they urged us to embrace the kind of renewal that God offers to us. That being said, old images are hard to forget, old assumptions are hard to break, and old habits are hard to shake. So I would like to close with the way that Eugene Peterson, a modern biblical scholar, has translated this ancient passage from the epistle of Peter.

18-21 Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God. It cost God plenty to get you out of that dead-end, empty-headed life you grew up in. He paid with Christ’s sacred blood, you know. He died like an unblemished, sacrificial lamb. And this was no afterthought. Even though it has only lately—at the end of the ages—become public knowledge, God always knew he was going to do this for you. It’s because of this sacrificed Messiah, whom God then raised from the dead and glorified, that you trust God, that you know you have a future in God.

22-25 Now that you’ve cleaned up your lives by following the truth, love one another as if your lives depended on it. Your new life is not like your old life. Your old birth came from mortal sperm; your new birth comes from God’s living Word. Just think: a life conceived by God himself! That’s why the prophet said, “The old life is a grass life, its beauty as short-lived as wildflowers; Grass dries up, flowers wilt, God’s Word goes on and on forever.” This is the Word that conceived the new life in you.”

If this makes sense to you, you are well on your way to being born anew.

Amen.

⁴ Psalm 51:10.