

Labor and Delivery
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Lent 2A
John 3:1-17

I spent the summer after graduating from college with my brother Scott and his wife, Marcia, in the suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts. Scott and Marcia are outspoken and active Christians, certainly more outspoken than I was in those months following a religiously relaxed college career. I came home from work one afternoon to find them talking to a neighbor on the back porch about being “born again.” He was a typical New Englander—pale, tight-lipped, wearing a pair of faded corduroys. He looked at me, as we were being introduced, and then asked, “What about you? Have you been born again?”

I didn’t know what to say. With Scott and Marcia standing there I felt I should say, “Yes,” and in the end that’s what I did, but it didn’t feel right somehow. I went up to my room and pondered one of the most troubling questions I had ever been asked: “Have you been born again?”

The truth is, that question might never have been asked if it were not for this passage in the third chapter of John. It’s the “born again” passage, the one that evangelists turn to again and again in trying to explain the problem of sin and the way of salvation. I won’t try to explain every detail of it, but I would like for us to look closely at the first few exchanges, which run essentially like this: 1) Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and begins a conversation. 2) Before he can really get started Jesus interrupts with the surprising and seemingly out-of-place demand that he be “born again.” 3) Nicodemus objects—that’s impossible! 4) But Jesus persists—there is no other way to enter the Kingdom.

Let’s look at those one at a time:

1. Nicodemus starts the conversation by saying, “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.” It sounds like flattery. You think at first that Nicodemus and his cronies in the Sanhedrin must want something from Jesus. But maybe not. Maybe Nicodemus has seen something in Jesus’ deeds or in his eyes that convinced him—“Here is one who is truly in touch with the Almighty!”—and so he comes to him in secret, under the cover of darkness, because he wants to know: “What does God think of me? Am I doing what he wants? Am I making him proud? Tell me, Jesus, if you know?”
2. Jesus says this surprising thing: “You must be born again, Nicodemus.” Scholars have had some fun with the Greek word that is found on Jesus’ lips in this verse, because it can be translated either “born again,” or “born from above.” That’s a delightful double meaning, and I wouldn’t be surprised if John used that particular Greek word intentionally, but too much debate about whether it’s “born again” or “born from above” can take the punch out of the message. I think the important word here is “born.” Out of all the possible metaphors Jesus might have chosen to describe “seeing” or “entering” the Kingdom of God, he picks this one. “The experience of the Kingdom,” he might say, “is not like visiting a foreign country, or entering an unfamiliar room, or reading science fiction. The experience of the Kingdom is like being born: it’s a radical, traumatic, life-changing event.”
3. Regardless of what the scholars say, Nicodemus understands Jesus to be saying he must be born not *from above*, but *again*, and he wants to know how. “A man can’t enter into his mother’s womb and be born a second time, can he?” To which the answer is and

always will be, “Of course not: that’s a physical impossibility.” But perhaps that is the precise point of Jesus’ statement. Because what Nicodemus is doing by maintaining the rigorous demands of Pharisaism is like trying to give birth to himself—his spiritual self—and that’s a spiritual impossibility. Think back for just a moment to the circumstances of your own birth. Who was it that labored to get you here? You, or your mother? It was your mother, of course. None of us birthed ourselves. Our mothers *gave* birth to us. Did you hear that? They *gave us* our birth. Which means that our role in the whole process was a very passive one. Our job, as babies being born, was to let go and let our mothers labor on our behalf.

4. Jesus seems to be saying, “Nicodemus, for too long now you’ve been trying to deliver yourself by your own efforts. You come asking about the Kingdom and wondering if you’ve done enough to get in. I say to you that you must be born again—you must let go and trust God with this holy labor.”

Don’t you think that in every generation we tend toward Pharisaism? We like structure more than spontaneity. We are more comfortable with law than with spirit. If we came to Jesus at night asking questions they might be questions like these: “Will *we* get into heaven? Are we doing what’s required of us?” And he might say to us in the same tone of voice, “You must be born again.” Like Nicodemus some of us are trying to work our way into the Kingdom, trying to earn our salvation through church attendance, through paying our dues, through trying to be nice. In all of that we are trying to make sure that things are good between us and God. But that’s not how it works. Like babies being born we have to let go. We have to trust.

This is where John 3:16 seems to fit in. Jesus says that the one thing we can accept from

the start is that God loves us, and doesn't want any of us to perish. All we have to do to move from death to life is to believe in the Son, to trust this midwife of the Spirit to deliver us into the Kingdom. Are you ready for that? Are you sure you want to go? Because it will be different in the Kingdom. It will be bright and strange, like coming from the womb into the blinding glare of a delivery room. Most of us will wish we were back in the familiar darkness we came from. And yet if we can find the courage to do it, it will mean life for us, and salvation.

So, back to the question. Have you been born again? And back to my story. Had I? I don't think that in that summer after my college graduation I had. I think that like Nicodemus I was trying to work my way into the Kingdom. I remember being very conscious in that summer of looking like a Christian, of doing Christian things. And yet I also remember the terrible feelings of insecurity that I had. I didn't know if I was a Christian or not. And I didn't know what I could do to make myself "feel" like one. I worked at it, sweated, labored, but delivery didn't come in that summer or the next, or the next.

It was three years later that it came. I was in the car with my wife, Christy, heading south from our home in Kentucky toward the coast of South Carolina for a much-needed vacation. She was taking a nap in the passenger seat. I was driving, watching the dotted white lines flash by on my left. I was wondering about going to seminary, and mostly wondering if I should even be considering such a thing. I wasn't sure, really, that I had been born again. For years and years I had been trying to prove to others, and also to myself, that I was a Christian. I had underlined most of my Bible. I had spent time in prayer. I had performed acts of compassion. But there wasn't much joy in it, not much feeling of victory—it was labor.

The white lines kept flashing by on my left and I tried to imagine, "Well, what if I wasn't

a Christian but wanted to be? What would I do then?" I knew the answer to that question. I had told other people what to do. I would have to acknowledge the fact that I was a sinner, that, try as I might, I couldn't save myself. And then it dawned on me. That's just what I had been trying to do—save myself!—and there was a sudden flash of insight on the road to South Carolina, a blinding epiphany in which I realized I couldn't save myself, no matter how hard I tried, that only Jesus could save me. And for the first time ever I found myself letting go, relaxing into that glorious grace, and yes, in a way...it was like being born again.

When Christy woke up I don't think she noticed the difference in me, but it was there. I had been delivered from the impossible labor of trying to save myself. I wish I could say that was the end of it, but it wasn't. I not only had to be born again, but again and again and again. Because I do tend toward Pharisaism. I do try to pick myself up by my own spiritual bootstraps. I have to be reminded, by words like these in John 3, that that's not how it works in the Kingdom. We must leave the labor of spiritual birth to God, and accept the gift of our delivery. Our part in the process is both the easiest and hardest thing there is—we must believe—believe that God can do it and also believe that we can't.

So, what about you? Have you been born again? Have you left an opening in your life where God can get in and do some work? Or have you tightened up your system of belief until there is no place for anything new. Listen to what Jesus says, "The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Listen, "Truly I say to you that unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the Kingdom of God." Listen, "No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. You must be born from above."

This is radical stuff Jesus is talking about. It's traumatic, life-changing, troubling. It asks us to exchange our way of looking at the world for God's way, and that's not something any of us really wants to do. We like our way of looking at the world. It's familiar. It's comfortable. But if we want to have any part of the Kingdom we will have to give it up, and trust that the one who gives us our spiritual birth—like those who gave us our physical birth—

Knows what he's doing.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2020