

March 11, 2007

Born Again

John 3:1-13

Since the beginning of knowledge man has always believed in some form of super human being. In his *“Descent of Man”* Charles Darwin states, *“a belief in all prevailing spiritual agencies seems to be universal.”* Anthropologists generally agree that *“belief in a non-corporeal god or gods, belief in the after life, belief in the ability of prayer or ritual to change the course of human events – are found in virtually every culture on earth.”*

All of which leaves Robin Henig to write in the New York Times Magazine, *“Call it god; call it superstition; call it belief in hope or in belief beyond reason – whatever you call it, there seems to be an inherent human drive to believe in something transcendent, unfathomable and other worldly, something beyond the reach or understanding of science.”* In my mind all of which boils down to deep calling to deep. When we reach for that we do not understand but accept on faith we are not alone.

Everywhere and every age man has reached out for something to explain why we are here and how we are to live the life that has been given us.

In the opening Chapter of his Gospel John poses and answers this question through the outreach of Jesus as he chose his disciples. John writes that Phillip calls to Nathaniel, *“We have found him who Moses wrote about in the law and also the prophets – it is Jesus the Son of Joseph.”* This was an amazing statement to have been made at that particular time and place. A statement made by and to one of those people chosen by God to be his special people. Made to a man who along with his ancestors worshiped the unseen God Yahweh.

For years these special people had talked about and waited for the Messiah, God’s direct intervention into the affairs of man. Now John tells us that Phillip told Nathaniel, *“He is here among us our longing has been filled.”* With that revolutionary message John goes on to prove that Jesus is the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.

In the movie presentation of the Ten Commandments we are

presented with a dramatic event. The top of Mt. Sinai was covered with mist. The wind blew and the lightening, the very finger of God, burned the Ten Commandments or the Ten Words into tablets of stone. Here was the answer to man's questions, man's longing, we were given great wide noble principals to govern the living of our individual lives, to govern the way to the good life.

The bureaucracy wasn't satisfied that the individual had the ability to work out these principles for themselves. The scribes determined that these principles had to be refined and expanded. So began the process where man began to box in the good life by rules and regulations. Generation after generation spent untold hours defining the Ten Commandments so as to govern every conceivable situation one would encounter in this journey we call life. They ended up with a masterpiece titled "*Mishnah*" or "*Scribal Law*".

And that wasn't the end. There was a need for explanatory commentary to the Mishnah. That commentary is known as the "*Talmud*".

For example there was the principle that we are to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. On that day no work was to be done. What an opportunity for the bureaucrats. The scribes spent a great deal of work and long hours to explain what “*work*” was. The Mishnah contained 24 chapters on the Sabbath alone. In the Talmud we find the explanation relating to the Sabbath running into 64 columns.

According to the technocrats to tie a knot was work. That brought on the question of what kind of a knot. The knot of a camel driver or of a sailor was work, you couldn’t do it on the Sabbath. If you could tie or untie a knot with one hand then it was not work and was allowable.

Then came the fun part, getting around the rules. Enter the ingenuity of the individual. To get a drink of water from the well you had to tie a jar to a rope and lower it into the water at the bottom of the well. Under the Scribal Rules one was not aloud to tie a knot in a rope but you could tie a knot in a woman’s girdle or shawl. To get that cool drink of water you tied the water jar to a woman’s girdle and lowered it into the well. Make sense? This

was religion. This was considered pleasing to and serving God.

Was something missing? Did this provide the answers that were foremost in the mind of the thoughtful man? Why am I here? What am I supposed to do with this life that has been given me? How do I please the power that gave me life?

There was a group of some 6,000 Jews known as the *“The Separated Ones”* or *“Pharisees”*. These Pharisees dedicated their lives to keeping the rules that the scribes had worked out. They separated themselves from ordinary life to keep very detail of the Scribal Law. In Chapter 3 John tells us of a visit one of these Pharisees, or separated ones, made to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Here we need to read Chapter 3:1–13.

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.

² He came to Jesus at night and said, *“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”*

³ In reply Jesus declared, *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”*

⁴ *“How can a man be born when he is old?”* Nicodemus asked. *“Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”*

- ⁵ Jesus answered, ***“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.***
- ⁶ ***Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.***
- ⁷ ***You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘you must be born again.’***
- ⁸ ***The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”***
- ⁹ ***“How can this be?”*** Nicodemus asked.
- ¹⁰ ***“You are Israel’s teacher,”*** said Jesus, ***“and do you not understand these things?”***
- ¹¹ ***I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.***
- ¹² ***I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?***
- ¹³ ***No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.”***

Nicodemus was more than a Pharisee, he was a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was made up of seventy men. It had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world. This very important man came to Jesus with the universal

questions. *“How can I find the kingdom of God? How can I achieve salvation? How can I find meaning for my life?”* These are questions that each of us will ask sooner or later.

The answers Nicodemus received have given rise to the much battered around phrase, *“Born again Christians.”* When we hear or use this phrase we need to know just what it is we are talking about.

When Jesus told Nicodemus *“You must be born again”* it was not a statement that Nicodemus could not comprehend. Many generations before the prophet Ezekiel talked about a new heart;

“Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me and get yourself a new heart and a new spirit.”

“A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you.”

When a Gentile embraced Judaism he was treated as being *“reborn,”* a new person. He was cleansed from head to toe as a symbol of releasing him from all the impurities of the past. In theory he could then marry his mother.

On the other side of the Mediterranean in the Greek mystery

religions the initiation consisted of a voluntary death and a spiritual birth. After the initiation, some were fed with milk as if they were newborn babies.

Physical birth is an introduction into a strange physical world where life is to be lived. Life itself is a series of new births which this class refers to as New Beginnings.

We are born selfish and self centered. That new born savage must be born into a civilized personality. Look around in our society today and we see there are some people who never experienced a birth into civilized society. Born an animal, they remain animals. We try explaining some of the activity we witnessed as the work of mad men or people on drugs. In the main they are those who have never been born again into a civilized society.

As we grow physically we are reborn in knowledge. We catch a vision of intellectual truths and we are never the same. Some of our society is never reborn intellectually. Some are content to let the gossip or the news media shape their destiny. All they know is hearsay

A growing individual who develops fully has a rebirth to beauty. One of the wonders of the worship service is a birth to the beauty of music. Some of us never reach that point. Some are content to live in a tangle of discordant sounds.

John the Baptist came out of the wilderness calling the Jews to rebirth. His battle cry was *“repent.”*

Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about changing life. With his background Nicodemus couldn't be too upset about this theory of rebirth. Judging from his answer his concern was its impracticability. You see his journey, like ours, had been long. It was almost over. Day by day, act by act he had built a personality. He had developed a certain way to treat certain conditions. His thought process had been molded along certain lines. He was at ease with the way things were in his life. How can a man be born when he is old, when the game is almost over? He can't go back and start over. What is written, is written. *“I hear what you say Jesus but what you are saying is impossible.”* Is it?

The highest rebirth to which a man may come is a

commitment to believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ and to follow his example in the living of their life. This is as high as one can go in human development.

The key concept that seems to jump out of this meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus is "*obedience.*" Jesus says unless a man is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God. We follow the prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples, "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*"

John writes that those who believe have the power to become sons of God. Sonship is obedience. Sonship is love and the essence of love is obedience. Citizenship in the kingdom and to be the Son of God are really one and the same. Either requires ones complete and willing acceptance of God's will.

A second concept that comes out of this meeting is that of "*eternal life.*" Does that mean we live for ever? If that is what it means there are a lot of us who would turn it down in a minute. To a lot of people life that goes on forever would be hell, not heaven.

Eternal life must refer to quality not quantity. Eternal life

is the life that God lives. To enter into eternal life is to enjoy the life that God lives.

Eternal life is the life that lifts us above the temporary things into joy and peace which can only come from eternal things, things that do not change. As we change from a life that is self seeking to one who cares and gives we find life as an earthly journey guided and supported by an unseen companion that will not forsake us.

The phrase, "*born again*" as used by Christians today carries with it the concept of something strange and wonderful that happens overnight. We hear the phrase and we instantly think of the experience of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Not likely to happen. The new born spiritual life is a life of development, a life that grows in obedience and trust until it grows into the ever presence of the eternal.

"*Born anew*" means that we can come into life's concluding years knowing that while we have slipped and fallen, that we failed in so many ways, that we haven't done as well as we could, we are comforted in the trust that there is an everlasting mercy

to which we are committed. The concept of rebirth wasn't a strange concept to Nicodemus and it shouldn't be to us. It is the natural course of events as we strive to enter a life of meaning. If you will, the more abundant life Jesus promises us.

Pastor's Message

A man should never falter in the struggle to improve the quality of his life. The individual human life is never static. One is either deteriorating or growing better as the years go by. Especially should one be vigilant and careful of the unconscious trends or tendencies in his life. We are by nature prone to evil and evil is insidious in its encroachments within us. Like Samson of old, one may so gradually yield to evil that in the moment of testing he will not know that his strength has departed.

The best way to do something about improving the quality of our life is to begin by thoughtful resolves for the day which is upon us.

Bishop John Vincent gives us an insight into the greatness of his own life as he writes: "I will try this day to live a simple, sincere, serene life; repelling every thought of discontent, anxiety, impurity, discouragement and self-seeking; cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity and holy silence; exercising economy in expenditure, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service, fidelity to every trust and a childlike trust in God."

Much is said in depreciation of the effectiveness of resolutions and rededications. These objections come mostly from those who are not willing to make the effort to improve their state.

On the bridge of every ship which sails the ocean is a navigator who constantly checks his location and course. If any man reaches his highest destiny in life he must do likewise.

PRAYER

O God, help me vigilantly to watch the status and course of my life and may I constantly reset my course aright. Amen.

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