



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Born Again?

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 30, 2021

The First Sunday after Pentecost; Trinity Sunday

Based on Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

You may have heard the story of the Naval convoy sailing across a raging sea in the middle of a dark and stormy night, the moon blocked out by the overpowering clouds with nothing but darkness. On the navigation deck an officer saw a glimpse of a light dead ahead on the horizon and reported to the Captain. In the violent storm and tossing sea, the Captain was concerned that another ship was headed straight towards them and told the communication officer to signal the other ship to bear off. But a message came back, somewhat garbled by the stormy conditions: you bear off!

The Captain of the lead ship of the convoy was so alarmed that he woke the Fleet Admiral, who was on his ship, to explain the situation. The Admiral jumped out of his bunk and came to the bridge and saw the faint light and immediately fired off a message.

"This is Fleet Admiral Jonathan T. C. Kingsly, and we are approaching you with a flotilla of three 10-ton cruisers, five destroyers and six frigates. If you do not bear off, you will be sunk."

The reply came back, "Sir, this is Seaman first class Sam Smith and I'm in a light house!! Bear off!!"

To change one's course in life can be a dramatic and sometimes painful undertaking, but change is better than a fatal landing at the end. This is the problem Nicodemus is having. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is facing a fatal landing if he does not change directions. But Nicodemus knows only one way and that is the way of earth.

It is the only way that any of us knows. But Jesus appears on the scene and begins speaking of Heaven, of being born from above or born anew or Born Again. Nicodemus hears the words, "You must be born again," but he is confused. So he asks, "How can a person go back into their mother's womb and be born a second time.... Born Again?"

Nicodemus is the "cream of the Jewish crop." One could not dream of having life any better than he has. He is a Jew, a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin (the highest legal, legislative and judicial body of the Jews), and a highly respected teacher of the Old Testament Scriptures. Can you imagine being Nicodemus and having Jesus from backwoods Galilee telling you that all of this is not enough to get you into the kingdom of God? Yet this is precisely what Jesus tells Nicodemus. If a man like Nicodemus is not good enough for the kingdom of God, then who is? It is surprising that Nicodemus is so confused. He's a religious leader and should understand spiritual lessons, but somehow he must feel he has missed some crucial truth, and he comes in the dark of night seeking to be enlightened, searching for something to change his life.

Peter J. Gomes, the late Harvard Divinity School professor and Pusey Minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, wrote this in *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (p. 188): "What 'born again' means is literally to begin all over again, to be given a second birth, a second chance. The one who is born again doesn't all of a sudden get turned into a super-Christian.

"To be born again is to enter afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to cancel your old mortgage and start again. In other words, you don't have to be always what you have now become. Such an offer is too good to be true for many, confusing for most; but for those who seek to be other than what they are now, who want to be more than the mere accumulation and sum total of their experiences, the invitation, 'You must be born again' is an offer you cannot afford to refuse."

What is this born from above or born again that Jesus is talking about? Do we Episcopalian believe that "born again" stuff?

I have always found that if words are repeated in a scripture lesson that perhaps it is an important point. In John, the word 'born' is repeated eight times in just six verses. Maybe we should sit up and pay attention to what Jesus is saying.

Our Book of Common Prayer certainly does. The Baptism Service, which incorporates us through our confession of faith into the Church, includes those challenging words "Born Again." During the Thanksgiving over the Water, the celebrant says, "We thank you Father for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are REBORN by the Holy Spirit." And as the priest touches the water to bless it, the following words are said, "Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and BORN AGAIN may continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior." Immediately following the blessing of the water, the person is baptized "in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In the name of the Trinity, which we celebrate this Sunday.

The Reverend Canon Marianne Wells Borg puts it this way. "Let me describe what I think being born from above, or being born again, is like. Jesus refers to the things of the everyday, things that are here, now. Like the lilies of the field, or the birds of the air, or the mustard seed, the withered grass or the fading flower. And then he would tell a story about them, and you would see them from a slightly different angle. Meaning would pour out of them. It's like Jesus saw things from the inside out.

"I suggest that is being born again. To see something. And then see it again. And then meaning pours from the inside out. A meaning that the heart sees. And knows. And ordinary things become full of awe and wonder, unexpectedly, humbly. Being born again helps us to see"ⁱ

We know that Nicodemus was transformed by coming face to face with Jesus. We may not fully know from this reading from the third chapter of John, but I believe Nicodemus was Born Again. Nicodemus is mentioned three times in the fourth gospel. In the seventh chapter, when the Pharisees and high priest were trying to arrest Jesus, they sent the temple guards to arrest him, but they returned empty handed because they were afraid of the crowds. When the religious leaders began to berate the guards, it was Nicodemus who reminded them that it was illegal to arrest Jesus on hearsay evidence; they needed to hear Jesus firsthand. Because Nicodemus questioned the religious leaders, Jesus wasn't arrested at that time.

The last time Nicodemus is mentioned is after Jesus' crucifixion in the nineteenth chapter. Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body so he can bury him. Nicodemus goes with him and brings spices and herbs to anoint the body for burial. Nicodemus is changed; he no longer comes in the dark of night. When other followers run away, Nicodemus comes forward in broad daylight and makes himself known to Pilate, who can do him harm. BORN AGAIN?

Nicodemus, for some, became the icon for BORN AGAIN. On April 18, 1877, a group of seven—six of whom were Black—established the Nicodemus Town Company in Kansas. Historian Daniel Burke notes that, "To blacks after the [Civil War](#), Nicodemus was a model of rebirth as they sought to cast off their old identity as enslaved."ⁱⁱ Two African American clergy, William Smith and Thomas Harris, along with W.R. Hill, a white land speculator, served as the town's president and treasurer, respectively. Most of the group consisted of formerly-enslaved people from Kentucky in search of freedom and a new livelihood. The goal was to establish the first all-black settlement on the Great Plains. Professor Rosamond Rodman of Mt. St Mary's College, Los Angeles, asserts that freed slaves who moved to [Nicodemus, Kansas](#) after the Civil War named their town after him. An initial group of thirty arrived from Kentucky, taking the railroad to the end of the line in Ellis, Kansas, and walking the remaining thirty-five miles to Nicodemus, and another 350, arrived two months later, with more to follow the next year. Within five years of its founding, Nicodemus, Kansas, had a newspaper, a hotel, two churches (African Methodist Episcopal and Baptist), and a post office."ⁱⁱⁱ

Remember Romans 8? "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, Abba! Father!, it is that very spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."

This weekend an event was to have been held to commemorate an incident that occurred 100 years ago, with John Legend performing and a keynote speech by Stacey Abrams. It has been cancelled. If you saw the frontpage article in *New York Times* or read the *New York Times Magazine* for this Sunday, you are aware that I'm talking about an event called "Remember and Rise"—the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre in Oklahoma that left between 100-300 dead, 800 people treated for injuries, 35 city blocks in charcoal ruins and more than 1,200 homes and businesses destroyed, including churches, schools, a hospital and library and countless lives scared and shattered forever. Following WWI, Tulsa was recognized nationally for its affluent African American community referred to as "Black Wall Street," in the Greenwood District of Tulsa. Even now, 100 years later, the full truth is not known, as mass graves are being discovered, and little if any relief or insurance coverage was received by the African American victims of the racial massacre—not even for the three remaining survivors, who are each over 100 years old and recently testified before a House Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties.

Why do I mention this horrific event on this holiday weekend as we celebrate Trinity Sunday and Memorial Day weekend, when it would be so much easier to reminisce about cookouts with family as we begin our first long weekend of the summer season? I do so because I believe that we all need to follow the example of Nicodemus and be BORN AGAIN, to see things differently as Jesus sees them. To be broken open with the same incredulous questions that Nicodemus asked as he looked into Jesus' eyes. Once one truly looks into the eyes of Jesus, it is difficult to turn away without being changed. To be BORN AGAIN.

If you don't believe that then ask a long parade of witnesses. Ask Mary Magdalene, who would say, "Yes, it is true. I looked into his face at the tomb, and I became the first evangelist to tell others that he lives." Ask Matthew, who would answer, "I too looked into his face, and though a dishonest tax collector, I became an honest man." Ask Paul, who would reply, "When I met Jesus, I changed. My zeal for the law became a zeal for love." Ask Peter. "Change, you ask? Oh yes, I changed! After I met Jesus I had to wrestle with my prejudices against the Gentiles."

We are all broken men and women and our need is to be healed, changed, repaired, forgiven. The true question for this morning is not "What was Nicodemus searching for?", but what are *you* searching for in this confusing world? IS IT POSSIBLY to be BORN AGAIN?

I close with the Prayer of Nicodemus, adapted by Sarah Foulger:

God of second chances, who is patient with our confusion and who leads us into greater understanding if only we have ears to hear and souls willing to search, grant that we may be born anew each day into hope, born anew each day into joy, born anew into your realm. When we become legalistic in our living, teach us the language of forgiveness. When we become concrete in our thinking, lift us into the ways of your Spirit. When we become stuck in religious patterns that lead us away from you, bring us back to living faith. In your grace ever remind us that 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.

Amen.

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ⁱ Borg, Marianne. "Being Born from Above." *The Marcus Borg Foundation: Sermons*, March 17, 2017, <https://marcusjborg.org/being-born-from-above/>

ⁱⁱ Burke, Daniel. "Nicodemus, the mystery man of Holy Week." *Washingtonpost.com*, The Washington Post, 27 March 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/nicodemus-the-mystery-man-of-holy-week/2013/03/27/0e97fb04-9720-11e2-a976-7eb906f9ed9b_story.html. Accessed 30 May 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rodman, Rosamond C., "Naming A Place Nicodemus" (2008). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1399. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1399>