

Born Again? Or A Work in Progress?
John 3:1-17

"An elderly aunt had her little four-year-old niece over for dinner. The aunt decided to say the grace. She said, 'In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Ghost.' Immediately the little girl spoke up and said, 'Don't say "Ghost;" it's the Holy Spirit!'

As soon as she said it, she realized that she may have hurt her aunt's feelings, so she added, 'You can say "Holy Ghost" on Halloween.'¹

Today is Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday of the year dedicated to a *doctrine*, a *teaching*, instead of an *event* in Jesus' life or the church's life. There is no worked out *doctrine* of the Trinity in the Bible. But since the beginning, Christians have experienced God, met God, in different ways, and so we try to find a way to put our encounters into words. That's why we speak in riddles about the Trinity.

We encounter God [beyond] us. God among us. God within us.²

C.S. Lewis said that what really matters isn't talking *about* God as Three yet One, but being drawn into God's life.

'What I mean is this. An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get in touch with God. But he also knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God - that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the [one] to [whom] he is praying - the goal he is trying to reach. God is also [that] inside him which is pushing him on - the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole three-fold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary [person] is saying his prayers.'³

One of the surprising things I learned about the spirituality of the Celtic peoples (the Irish, Scots, Welsh, Cornish, Bretons, and Manx) is how significant the Trinity was in their daily life, and not just because St. Patrick supposedly used a shamrock as an analogy. The Trinity was no abstract theological puzzle, but an almost constant awareness of God as Father, Son and Spirit was woven into the fabric of their lives. Seeing the sun come up in the morning they might greet it with a word of thanks for a new day and God's word of light on the first day of creation. Drawing water from a well, one might think about Jesus and the woman at the well and offer a prayer for the living water. Lighting a fire might bring to mind the Spirit's dancing like fire on Pentecost.

In the western isles of Scotland Alexander Carmichael heard this poem some said before their prayers:

"I am bending my knee
In the eye of the Father who created me,
In the eye of the Son who purchased me,
In the eye of the Spirit who cleansed me,
In friendship and affection..."⁴

And from a highland woman living in the Western islands named Mary Macrae, Carmichael heard this:

God with me lying down,
God with me rising up,
God with me in each ray of light,
Nor a ray of joy without Him,
Nor one ray without Him.

Christ with me sleeping.
Christ with me waking,
Christ with me watching,

Every day and night,
 Each day and night.
 God with me protecting,
 The Lord with me directing,
 The Spirit with me strengthening,
 For ever and for evermore,
 Ever and evermore, Amen.

[Chief of chiefs, Amen.]⁵

C.S. Lewis was right. God [is] above us. God [is] among us. God [is] within us.⁶ If only we could all experience it for ourselves.

There was a devout teacher of the law who belonged to the Pharisee party and was a member of the high court, Nicodemus.

He came to see Jesus at night, in secret, because he was afraid of being seen with him, but he didn't want to be *left in the dark* about Jesus.

He started out by saying, "Rabbi, we know you're a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you do unless God was with him." And Jesus said, "I'm telling you the truth; no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, from the top down, from top to bottom⁷, all over."

But Nicodemus misunderstood. He thought Jesus said born *again*. He said, "I don't understand. I'm an old man. How can I be born all over again? I can't get back into my mother's womb and be born again."

"I'm telling you the truth," Jesus said. "You can't get into the kingdom by squeezing yourself into it anymore than you can squeeze yourself into your mother's womb again.⁸ No one can get into the kingdom of God without being born from water and Spirit. You were born physically from a mother and a father, but what's born by the Spirit is spirit – breath from breath, spirit from spirit, wind from wind. Don't be surprised that I'm telling you all you have to be born from above. The wind blows where it wants, and you hear the sound it makes, but you don't know where it's coming from or where it's going. It's like that with everyone who's born from the Spirit, wind, breath.

"How can it be like that?" said Nicodemus. "All of us are born out of the water of the womb. And God has breathed the Spirit, the breath of life, into us all. I know that converts to our faith have to go under the water to die as a pagan and be born as a Jew and given milk to drink like a baby.⁹ But me? I've been a Jew all my life, and a student and teacher of the Scriptures.

Jesus answered, "You mean to tell me you're a famous teacher, but you don't understand?"

"Well, tell me how!"

"How? Just like you were born. What did you have to do to be born?"

"Well, not much. I guess nothing.

I must have been pretty comfortable, protected in the womb's water, and then when the time came I was pushed out."

"Right! That's how it's done only more so. Born from above, born top to bottom."

"How? Do you mean born from above, born from the top down, born top to bottom or born again?"

["Yes."]

"Yes," was Jesus' puzzling answer.

"It's like the wind. No one can control it. It blows when it wants and where it wants. You don't know where it's going to come from or where it's going. You can't outguess it, put a harness on it, make it do what you want. It's like that, but more - Spirit, breath, wind. That's how you get in."

Since the word for all three: spirit, breath, wind is the same in the language they spoke, Nicodemus asked, "Which one do you mean?"

And Jesus answered, "Yes."

But "How?" Nicodemus asked again. "What's the secret? What's the technique? What do I have to do? How do I do it?"

"You don't."

"I don't?"

"You don't. What did you have to do to be born?"

"Nothing," said Nicodemus.

"What can you do about the wind," asked Jesus.

"Nothing."

"Right!"

"But *how*?" insisted Nicodemus, still not understanding.

"God loved the world so much that God *gave* his only Son. The word is *charis*, Nicodemus, gift."

"[Do] you mean *charis* in the ordinary sense or [do] you mean it in the theological sense: *grace*?"

"Yes."

"Birth, breath, wind, spirit, gift, Nicodemus."

"I don't understand."

"Right!" said Jesus. Now you're on the right track."

"I am?"

"Yes, you are...."¹⁰

Those words, *born again*, have become a sort of campaign slogan and password for a lot of churches. Your faith is judged valid or not depending on your answer to that question, "Are you a born-again Christian?" If to be a Christian requires being remade into a new person, then aren't all of us supposed to be *born again*? In that sense isn't it sort of redundant, kind of like saying, "Are you a *Christian* Christian? But the question is also taken out of the context of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. When we interpret it only as the private moment of an individual's conversion we miss the much deeper, complex meaning of the Greek word translated as *born again*: *anōthen* (ἀνωθεν).¹¹

The word has a lot more than one meaning. It can mean *born again*, or *born all over*, or *born from above*, or *born from the Spirit*.

It's so ironic that when people interpret it only as *born again*, they misunderstand Jesus *just the way Nicodemus did*. Jesus said *born from above*. Nicodemus heard *born again*. To assume Jesus was talking primarily about spiritual rebirth through individual conversion is to put our personal experience first and Christ second. We are born from above by the power of God in Jesus who, as John said, was lifted up on the cross.

To make *born again* a sound byte or a litmus test misses the depth of the new life Jesus offers Nicodemus and us.

We *should* have to work at understanding what Jesus is saying. He's talking about a whole new kind of life that doesn't have any precedent, life born by water *and* Spirit, life remade on the cross. It takes a whole new language to talk about it. To make a word a one-meaning-only slogan misses the way Jesus' words turn our whole world upside down, and it can't begin to do justice to the good news of what God is really doing through Jesus.¹²

Several years ago there was a small group study of Ephesians by John and Adrienne Carr called The Power & Light Co. In one session, we were asked to tell of a time in our lives when we felt most alive and especially felt God's presence. I said it was at my son Ian's birth. (Our daughter Moira hadn't been born yet.) I felt privileged to be there. I knew I was a part of something much bigger than me, much bigger than us.

Birth is a wonder and a miracle, a glimpse of, and an opportunity to be a part of, God's creating power at work. And so Jesus uses that powerful image of birth when he talks about this new life.

And then he talks about the wind. I can remember sitting on my grandparents' porch on 55th street in Kansas City on summer evenings before air conditioning. After dinner, instead of watching TV, the grownups would talk, and the kids would play, sometimes overhearing things we needed to hear, sometimes overhearing things we probably shouldn't have heard. Swinging in the porch swing, eating a dish of vanilla ice cream, chasing fireflies in the twilight, we tried to escape the humid heat. And once in a while a rare breeze would begin to rustle the honeysuckle vines and bring relief.

Other nights there would be the sirens of tornado warnings, and we would go to my grandparents' house, prepared to go to the basement, since didn't have one at our house.), Once there was news of a whole town wiped out by a tornado, and we saw the slabs of what had been homes, now only concrete with pipes sticking up – all that was left. Wind could be refreshing. Wind could be destructive.

Wind, breath, spirit, birth, rebirth. *Pneuma*: a breeze, a breath of fresh air. In both Hebrew and Greek the word for spirit is the same word as breath and wind. In Greek it's *Pneuma*, the word we get *pneumatic* and *pneumonia* from.

It was the Spirit of God that swept over the waters and brought creation out of chaos. It was the Spirit of God that breathed life into Adam. It was the Spirit of God that gave Mary a child. It was the Spirit of God that came like a dove as a sign to Jesus at his baptism. It was the Spirit of God that sent him to preach good news to the poor and freedom to the captive. It was the Spirit of God that gave birth to the church on Pentecost day, the wind that blew away the disciples' old notions of who was in and who was outside God's plans.

It's been said that "...Our God is a God of ceaseless change - a god who is ever creating and ever renewing. The Bible is full of this theme of creation and renewal. It talks about a new covenant, a new heart, a new birth, a new person or new creation, a New Jerusalem and a new heaven and a new earth."¹³

In spite of the way we talk about our bodies wearing out as we age, I've read that in fact "...modern biology has shown that you and I get a new body every seven years. This means that you and I are literally not the same people we were seven years ago. Not one cell, not one molecule that was in your body seven years ago is there today! Someone has called this the 'seven-year switch.' This means that when you get to be seventy years old, you have had ten completely new bodies. What an astounding thought!

"Of course, this is simply the way we are made. It's part of being a living creature. Living beings are always changing. You and I have no voice in the matter; there is no way we can hang on to the molecules in our bodies, even if we wanted to."¹⁴

Like Nicodemus, we get it wrong by trying too hard to get it right. Wind, birth, eternal life - You can't control them, you can't buy them, you can't produce them on demand. They're gifts. *charis*: a gift, the same word we get *charisma* and *charismatic* from.

Even belief itself is a gift. The gift isn't a reward you get for believing. If you believe, you already have the gift. You have God. You have life.

In John 3, in verse 7 the word *you* singular becomes *you plural*, or *you all*, or *y'all*, or nowadays even *y'all y'all* as Southerners say it.

You see, Jesus wasn't just talking just to Nicodemus. Nicodemus represents the people of Israel and all of us whose faith is unclear and who are looking for more proofs, more miracles. To Nicodemus, to Israel, and to us, Jesus says clearly and emphatically: *God's love is a gift, no strings attached*.

The message to Nicodemus, and to all of us who can't seem to give up the notion that if we just *believe* hard enough we'll finally be *good enough* to deserve God's love,¹⁵ the message of the Gospel, is that God's love is for all who're willing accept the gift.

And, having accepted it, we find a whole new life free to enjoy, not intimidated by fear any more, not weighed down by anxiety. Then, we turn around and reach out to a world that's so desperately in need of that love.

Usually in the Gospel of John, the word *world* is used in the negative sense - the way things are in a world that doesn't pay any attention to God, that lives by its own distorted values. But here in John 3:16, that bumper sticker verse taken out of context, it's different.

The scripture says, "God so loved *the world*." It doesn't say, "God so loved people like us," or "God so loved born-again Christians," or "God so loves the people who deserve it," or "God so loves just *individuals*, one by one." It says, "God so loved the *world*..."

I take it literally - the whole world - you, me, our families, our friends, our enemies, our country and every other country, every race, every plant, animal, rock, river, hill and plain - the *world* as in the whole ball of wax, or better, this little ball of blue, green and white spinning through space. That's what God sent Jesus to save from itself.

Some of you may remember those Church Ad Campaign newspaper ads and posters a few years back - the ones that say things like, "Jesus came to take away your sins, not your mind," or that show two hands in prayer and "Try this simple exercise," or pictures of pall bearers carrying a casket into a church with the caption, "Will it take six strong men to get you back into church?"

There's one that's probably too much of a dig at some Christians and churches to really use, but when taken in the best sense should be true of every church, including ours. It's a picture of a baby with the caption: "You're welcome at our church no matter how many times you've been born."

Let's hope that's really true. And if it isn't, let's make what we say come true: Open hearts, open minds, open doors.

¹ *The Catholic Digest*, in *Aha!* 3:5 May-June 1994, 23.

² Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B After Pentecost 1*, 29.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 142-143, adapted.

⁴ "Rune before Prayer, Invocations, Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gaedlica: Hymns and Incantations*, 35.

⁵ Mary Macrae, "God with me lying down," Invocations, Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gaedlica: Hymns and Incantations*, 36.

⁶ Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B After Pentecost 1*, 29.

⁷ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 24:1 January, February, March 1986, 36.

⁸ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 24:1 January, February, March 1986, 36.

⁹ Ross Marrs, "Charting the Course," *Emphasis* 19:10 March 1990, 7-8.

¹⁰ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* 24:1 January, February, March 1986, 37, adapted.

¹¹ *The New Interpreter's Bible* vol. 10, 554-555

¹² *The New Interpreter's Bible* vol. 10, 554-555

¹³ Sanford Wylie, "When People Are Made New," First UMC, Shawnee, OK, in *Windows to Truth* 14:1 January/February/March 1993, 9.

¹⁴ Sanford Wylie, "When People Are Made New," First UMC, Shawnee, OK, in *Windows to Truth* 14:1 January/February/March 1993, 9.

¹⁵ Ross Marrs, "Charting the Course," *Emphasis* 19:10 March 1990, 8.