

Born from Above
Laura Smith Conrad

May 26, 2018 Trinity B
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 6:1-8

6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.
6:2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.
6:3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."
6:4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.
6:5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"
6:6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.
6:7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."
6:8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

John 3:1-17

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.
3:2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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."
3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."
3:4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"
3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.
3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'
3:8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."
3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"
3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?
3:11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.
3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?
3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.
3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
3:16 "For 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.

3:17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Proclamation of the Word

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

Now why would any of us want to be born from above?

Why change? Maybe you and I like our lives just the way they are. Maybe we are self-satisfied. We have all we need: food, shelter, companionship, and more. In fact, most of us have too much- too much activities, too much to eat, too much stuff.

Nicodemus came to Jesus after dark to ask some questions. He was drawn to Jesus. Nicodemus was a person of status in his community- a Pharisee with much knowledge of the faith. He was in his day living a comfortable lifestyle. But something must have been missing for him to go see Jesus. His discontent causes him to seek the Rabbi who speaks of the Kingdom of God. There is something strangely attractive and yet, Nicodemus cannot get his mind around God's ways. What does Jesus mean we must be born from above, of water and Spirit?

But when we are young God seems so real, so recent perhaps. It seems that with age, we grow farther and farther from God. Maybe you recall early memories where God seemed so real, so close.

Parker Palmer tells the story of a three year-old girl¹. She was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother was pregnant again, and the little girl was excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door closed made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby's arrival. They realized that could let their daughter do this, and if they heard anything strange happening, they could be in the baby's room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go in to the room, shut the door, and raced to listen to the intercom. They heard their daughter's footsteps moving across the baby's room. Imagining her standing over the baby's crib, they heard her saying to the three day-old brother, "Tell me about God- I've almost forgotten."

When the disciples asked Jesus about the Kingdom of God, he placed a child in front of them saying, "Let the little children come, do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mark 10:14)

As children grow their sense of self-conscious and separated self happens rather naturally. It is our common human story. In the garden of Eden Adam and Eve realize they are separated from God and choose to know good and evil. We call this "the fall" into a world where the self becomes the center. But have you noticed that children just seem to have an innate sense of the presence of God? Mystery and imagination have not been stamped out.

Perhaps as we age we become more separated from God and more concerned with self. God does not leave us, but we pull away. The world of mystery and childhood falls behind. By adolescence we hear those messages of culture, adults, parents. In our culture the message centers on the three A's: appearance, achievement, and affluence. As teens we all wrestle with our enough-ness- am I attractive enough? Am I smart enough? Am I good enough? Do I have enough?ⁱⁱ

Sometimes we fall trap to a false sense of self based on these values. As Frederick Buechner put it, "We live our lives from the outside in rather than from the inside out." We need to be born again or born from above. That innate knowledge of God's ever-present help has faded. We have been deceived and think our value is based on the three A's of attractiveness, achievement, and affluence rather than the unconditional love of God. To be born again is to become our true selves. We learn to live from the inside out rather than the outside in.

Paul says it this way, "in Baptism we die to self and are born again to new life. We are baptized into Christ, the old has passed away and the new has come." We are raised to new life. Our new life is a God-given identity that recalls that nothing can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Nothing, not even death, nor life, nor angels, nothing, but we can feel separate. We can be lost, in the dark, alone, confused.

Resurrection life is a life filled with the awareness of our true self who is created and known by God. We die to the old way and are given a new identity centered not in the self, but in God. We experience a rebirth- new life.

Some of us have had a dramatic born again experience like Saul on the road to Damascus, blinded and then able to really see for the first time that Jesus is the Son of God. He emerges as his truest version of his self- as Paul. Like John Newton, slave trader turned believer, who testifies in the hymn he penned "Amazing Grace"

Sing it with me..."Amazing grace...I once was lost, but now I am found, was blind, but now I see."

But still others of us have a gradual born from above experience that grows richer and deeper with time. Faith is a daily experience. Martin Luther spoke of "daily dying and rising with Christ" remembering each day that his primary identity is in Christ. That is something we must learn over and over again. We fall in love again with God, our first love.

We do not know if Nicodemus ever had that kind of conversion. Nicodemus comes to Jesus in person after dark. Darkness in the gospel of John means a separation from the presence of God. His spiritual blindness hinders his seeing. He literally gets stuck on Jesus' suggestion that he must be born again or born from above.

But I cannot blame Nicodemus, for no one wills herself to be born, right? We cannot birth ourselves. Birth is something that happens to us. Jesus says that this is the work of the Spirit. Nicodemus has knowledge of God, but Jesus is talking about a relationship. Don't we live and grow through relationship?

Last week we were able to meet with the students in this year's confirmation class. The two I met with were impressive. They testified to their faith openly and passionately. When I asked about what has changed their faith this year the young woman shared that she used to come to church because she had to, but now she doesn't want to miss being with her church family in worship and fellowship. The young man said through the relationship with the group, service to the disadvantaged, and the study they did, he learned that the church is the people and not the building. What I heard is that through the church, through relationships, through you, they have experienced the Love of God. They have been born from above through the power of the Spirit. They know who they are and whose they are. And they responded by professing their faith openly in the light in front of others. Their knowledge of God has turned into faith. Perhaps they have experienced that eternal life- the presence of God filling them with love.

Inspired by them, I wonder what is your testimony of faith? What do you believe?

I once thought I must have this born again experience because my friends talked about it so much. I felt a little guilty and ashamed that I had not had that experience. I could not manufacture or control it. But then I realized I had moments of God's powerful presence and grace. Moments where I could clearly see where God's hand had been moving and working. I experienced God's love and mercy especially through people who were disciples of Jesus- relationships. I had an awareness, a realization, a AHA!

And there were multiple times when I committed my life to Christ. There was no one moment, but many. Faith is a daily surrender to try to follow Jesus, to die to self daily, and seek first the Kingdom that he describes. Dying to self in my daily relationships, my daily work, my regular contact with strangers and problems- seeking to live as a follower of Christ. Being open to the Spirit and listening for the voice of the Holy. God is always active and the Spirit is moving. It is my role to realize it and respond. And God does God's birthing work. I have given birth and one thing was clear, I was not in control. It happened whether I was ready or not!!!

We cannot birth ourselves, but we can be like midwives who cooperate with God's Spirit. Nicodemus must have found something in Jesus attractive. I do, too. I think it is the reconnection with God from whom we come and in whom we live and move and have our being.

It is the life of the prodigal welcomed home- and a great happy dance ensues.

It is the demoniac being healed, restored to his right mind and to the community.

It is the life of the paralytic being lowered from the roof with the help of his friends.

It is Lazarus being raised from death, restored to his friends and family.

But it is also knowing those who mourn are blessed for they shall be comforted.

It is witnessing people who will lay down their lives for others whether in the line of duty or as a 7th grade science teacher in a school shooting. ⁱⁱⁱ

It is setting people free from systems that keep them in poverty- like opportunities in public education and through ministries like Ripple of One.

It is the despised Samaritan, the stranger, the other, being ministered to, not left to die.

It is working against unjust laws that treat human beings created in the image of God as animals.

It is justice for those who have been violated, or tortured, or abused.

For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son..not to condemn it, but to save it, heal it, make it whole.

It is what Jesus speaks of most- mercy and compassion.

It is abundant and overflowing life.

It is the gifts and fruit of the Spirit experienced and shared: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

I have seen it! This is the attractive, life-giving reconnection with God whose Kingdom is present and real.

This is eternal life- living in the unending Presence of the Living God. Loving God and neighbors is saving, healing.

As Jesus said, "We speak what we know and testify to what we have seen."

If I were to ask you what you believe and where God is at work, what would you say.

This is my testimony. What is yours?

Prayer: Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. In the powerful name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Borg, Marcus retelling story of Parker Palmer in *The Heart of Christianity; Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York, HarperCollins, 2004) 113-114.

ⁱⁱ Borg, Marcus, IBID, Chapter 6, pp.104-123.

ⁱⁱⁱ msn.com/en-us/news/us/meet-jason-seaman-the-noblesville-indiana-teacher-who-helped-stop-a-school-shooter