

Born Again February 20, 2005

**A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith**

Copyright © Makiki Christian Church. All Rights Reserved.

**The Sermon in a sentence:** God initiates our trusting in Jesus, and the evidence of that trust is our responsiveness to spiritual reality.

**Why I am preaching it:** So the members of the congregation will know what it means to be born again, and respond appropriately wherever they are in their spiritual journey.

The story of Jesus and Nicodemus is one of the easiest passages to preach on, and also one of the hardest. Easy because it is one of the key Scriptures on becoming a Christian, or entering the kingdom of God. Pretty much anybody who comes to church has at least some interest in those topics. It is difficult because the passage is so packed with good things. Any twenty-minute sermon will hardly scratch the surface. So I will tell you right now that I will not even try to cover the whole passage. I will concentrate on just two words, “born again.” Let me begin with a story.

The wife of one of my seminary professors recounted that when she was in high school she and her family were churchgoers out of habit, but they didn’t have any particular interest in following Jesus. She applied to a Christian college because her boyfriend had applied there, too. As she was filling out the application she came to the question, “Are you born again?” She had never heard the phrase before. She thought it was a pretty strange question, and she wasn’t sure what to make of it. But she decided they were probably asking her if she went to church, so she marked “yes.”

Is that what the question meant? Going to church? Lots of people do that, but their lives may or may not be any different from the people around them. We could ask all kinds of questions about being born again. But this morning I will ask only three: The first one is, “How are we born again?” The second one is, “What exactly does it mean to be born again?” And the third one is, “What is the evidence that we are born again?”

But before we get to the questions, we will need to look at today’s passage. That little phrase “born again” appears only three times in the Bible, and two of them are right here in John chapter 3. So we’re in the very best place to look for the answers to our questions.

Let's take a look at this fascinating little interview. The respected religious and community leader Nicodemus is humble enough to sit down to learn from this young rabbi Jesus who has been stirring up so much controversy, and here is their conversation: [Read John 3:2b-8]. Their talk continues, but we will focus on this first part.

Right from the beginning we find something unusual here. Both the Pharisees and the Jewish ruling council or Sanhedrin appear several times in the New Testament, but they are nearly always enemies of Jesus and of the church. But not Nicodemus. Somehow, God has touched him. He doesn't know it at the time, but I think we can say that in this passage we are watching part of the process of Nicodemus being born again. What attracted him to Jesus? I think that maybe he wasn't even sure himself. But something drove him to try and make a connection with this man Jesus. Some people criticize Nicodemus for coming at night, as if he were afraid to be seen by other people. But I don't think so. I think he was looking for a time when they would not be interrupted.

As a Pharisee this elderly and respected man would have worked hard for decades at studying and even memorizing large portions of the Old Testament. If you had asked him how to please God he would have responded, "You must do your very best to follow all the rules of the Bible, and all the traditions of our people." Most of the Pharisees were satisfied with that answer, but Nicodemus sensed there was something more.

The first thing he says isn't a direct question, but more of an indirect one. I think Nicodemus was asking, "I know your teaching is from God. I long to please God, but I know that I am missing something. What is it?" How would you have answered him? He probably expected that Jesus would tell him to start doing certain things differently—maybe that he would add a few more commandments to the ones that Nicodemus was already trying to keep.

Even today if you ask people how to become a Christian they will often answer by listing behaviors—perhaps the most common one is that to be a Christian you need to attend church, or maybe that you need to be baptized.

But Jesus takes the conversation in what must have been a shocking new direction for Nicodemus—Jesus says, "I am not asking you first to do anything differently, but rather to become a different person. I am asking for

a change as radical as the change when you came out of your mother's womb and entered this physical world. That's what entering the Kingdom of God is all about."

And Nicodemus's response is exactly on target: "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born!" Of course Nicodemus knew as well as we do that Jesus was not speaking literally. He did not know exactly what Jesus meant, but he understood that Jesus was asking of him a change that was completely impossible, something that he could never do on his own.

A few years ago a book came out called, "Having Our Say." It was written by two sisters, Sadie and Bessie Delaney, who were 104 and 102 when they wrote it. Bessie comments something like, "When I was young, I wanted to change the world. Now that I am old, I realize that I cannot even change myself!" Nicodemus would have agreed. What in the world was Jesus asking of him?

Jesus answers with a metaphor that helped Nicodemus, and can help us, to understand what entering the kingdom of God is all about. He says: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

We all know something about physical birth, or being born of water. That familiar experience will help us to understand the unfamiliar experience of being born of the Spirit or being born again. Looking at physical birth will help us to answer our three questions about spiritual birth: "How are we born again?" "What exactly does it mean to be born again?" "What is the evidence that we are born again?"

Physical birth starts out as a decision on the parents' part. The parents know that the baby is going to be born long before the baby does. It is not even the baby's choice to be born. The parents' decision begins a process that cannot be rushed, even though the mother's might want to speed it up. When the pregnancy is finally over, the baby is born. There's a funny thing about birth—every single one of us has been born, but none of us remembers it.

So looking at physical birth helps us with our first question: "How is a person born again?" Just as physical birth is a process that starts with the

decision of the parents, so spiritual birth starts with the decision of God, our spiritual Father.

Many people here at Makiki have parents or a spouse or children or other loved ones who have not entered the kingdom of God. We can say they are not born again. Some within the church are not sure if they are in the kingdom. Well, you cannot pressure your children or other loved ones into being born again, and you cannot even make yourself be born again. Only God can do it. How are we born again? By the action of God.

So the best place to start is by prayer that those you love or even that you yourself might be born again. And then respond to anything you sense that God might be calling you to do. Although Nicodemus could not make himself be born again, he did choose to obey that inner urging to go and talk with Jesus. God initiates, and we need to respond to his initiative.

And God loves to hear and to answer that kind of prayer. He is delighted in any positive response we make to him. Remember those last two verses that were read this morning. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” God wants people to be born again. It is his purpose. Pray for those you care about, pray for yourself. Then respond to any leading you receive. So the first point about being born again is that God initiates it, and we can ask him in prayer to initiate it for us or for others.

Looking at physical birth helps us to answer our second question as well: “What exactly is being born again?” Physically, once you were in the womb, now you are out of the womb. You are born. Spiritual birth also has a specific meaning. The verses we just read relate being born again to believing or trusting in Jesus. Once you did not trust Jesus as the ruler of your life who has forgiven your sins, now you do. You are born again. You don’t remember your physical birth, and you may not remember your spiritual birth. One of my grandmothers had a clear Christian faith, but she could never remember not being a Christian. Trust in Jesus came to her as a very small child. Our eldest son would say that he came to faith in Jesus sometime during sixth grade, but he could not point to a particular day. I remember a date and time when I first trusted Jesus. But none of us is any more or less born again than the others. So the second point is that being born again means something specific: trusting Jesus as the ruler of your life and the one who forgives your sins.

So being born again is the work of God in us, and specifically it means coming to the place of trusting our lives to Jesus. That brings us to our third question. “What is the evidence of being born again, or how can I know if I am born again?” The evidence of physical birth is being responsive to the physical world. Once children are born they begin to see, to hear, to be hungry for nourishment. They begin to function in the physical world. The evidence of being born is not perfection. Some children are brighter than others. Some children see or hear better than others, but in one way or another, all respond to their environment. If your children are not responding well to their surroundings you don’t say, “Oh dear, maybe they weren’t born after all!” Of course they were born. You look for the help that is needed for them to develop appropriately.

The evidence of spiritual birth is being responsive to the spiritual world. Is there some attraction to Jesus and a desire to know him better? It will not be equally strong in every Christian, and it will not be equally strong in the same Christian all the time, but it will be there in some way. Is there a sense of wrongdoing when we do things that we know are not appropriate for God’s children? Do we resist temptation, even if we are often unsuccessful? When we do wrong, do we confess it to Jesus and ask his forgiveness? Is there some interest in knowing the Bible better? Is there a desire to open ourselves more deeply to other followers of Jesus? Is there a commitment to the church that we are a part of?

These would all be evidence of being responsive to the spiritual world. We all need some help in maturing, but if these evidences are in place we do not need some further experience of being born again.

I should add that we are not the best judges of how well we are responding to spiritual reality. The same is true of physical reality. I thought that everybody saw the distance as a blur. I had to go to the ophthalmologist, who knew more about vision than I did, and get fitted for a pair of glasses. I had no idea that it was normal to see the distance clearly. In the same way, we will find that others can evaluate the evidence of our spiritual health better than we can. As we share in small groups or prayer partnerships, we might find that we were being too hard on ourselves. We are in better spiritual health than we thought. Or we may need to get some blind spots pointed out to us in order to become healthier.

It doesn't always happen, but sometimes God allows me to have an experience or to hear a story that fits perfectly into the sermon I am preparing. It happened this week.

Remember that I began the sermon with the story of my seminary professor's wife. I want to finish with another story that I heard from a pastor of another church just this week. A Buddhist woman began attending his church. I'm not sure why she did so, but something in Buddhism didn't satisfy her. Month after month she came. That church celebrates communion on the first Sunday of every month, just as we do here at Makiki. Every month she passed the plate along without taking the bread or the cup, because she said that she did not believe that Jesus had died for her and forgiven her sins. This went on for a year. This year on February 6 as the communion service began, suddenly she realized that she did believe the Gospel message, and for the first time she took communion.

A week later, she shared the following story with the leaders of her church. For years she had suffered from a difficult relationship with one of her family members. I am not sure of the details, but apparently she was angry and alienated from him. Then in that communion service she was born again. During the week that followed, for the first time in her life she was able to respond to her family member not simply by being angry with him, but by praying for him.

Do you see how beautifully her story illustrates being born again, or entering into the kingdom of God? God took the initiative and began drawing her to himself, and she responded positively by coming to church. When she started attending church she did not know why, or what the result would be. But we can see that the Holy Spirit was at work in her life, and the spiritual pregnancy had begun. As always, God took the initiative in her being born again, and she responded.

There came a specific change—that is, she came to the place of believing that Jesus was her Lord, and she trusted Jesus to forgive her sins. Not everybody remembers being born again, but in her case she will probably always remember what took place on communion Sunday in February, 2005.

Physical birth ends the process of pregnancy, but it begins the process of adapting to the world around us. For this woman, being born again was the end of one process in her life, but the beginning of adapting to her new,

spiritual life. Within a week she began to see the evidence of being born again. She began to see spiritual reality as she never had before, and to respond to hostility in a brand new way—by prayer instead of simply by anger. And she is in a community of believers who can encourage her and help her to evaluate her spiritual condition accurately.

Let us pray.