

Born Again, For What?

Genesis 12:1 – 4a

John 3:1-17

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Have you ever caught yourself wondering, “Wouldn’t it be great being 19 years old again? But instead of being plagued by feverish appetites, you now enjoy the maturity, wisdom and grace of a seasoned citizen!”

Snapping back to reality, we’re forced to set aside childish things and face facts. The past is past, you can’t go back and quite honestly you shouldn’t go back. This wishful thinking is an illusion. You have no choice but to stay in the present tense because that’s all that’s real.

I think this is what Nicodemus was trying to say after Jesus told him, “You must be born again.”

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Unless a person is born from above (born again) it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to, God’s kingdom.”

Nicodemus answered, “How can anyone be born again who’s already grown old?”

Nicodemus was a wise rabbi. He knew you can’t turn back the clock. You can’t be physically born again or for that matter become young again. Obsessing over your lost youth is a symptom of midlife crisis.

This is all true but Nicodemus still wasn’t getting the point. Jesus wasn’t advocating turning back the clock to recapture the past, but pushing the clock forward into the future to guarantee the present.

Jesus was basically saying, “Nicodemus, you’re not listening. I’ll say it again, unless you submit to the invisible becoming visible, a new baptism into eternal life, you can’t enter God’s Kingdom. When you submit, the ‘new you’ taking shape within you is formed by someone you can’t see or touch, the Spirit of God. So don’t be surprised when I say you must be born from above, or out of this world, so to speak. You are born again through the Spirit of God.”

Notice Jesus wasn’t saying, you must to be born again to get into heaven. Jesus was saying, “...no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.”

Many Christians today proudly call themselves, “born again Christians.” They believe being born again means securing their reservations for a place in heaven after they die. Many of them also believe if you don’t have a similar born again experience, you’re still hopelessly lost. But is being born-again isn’t just about having a personal relationship with Jesus so you can get into heaven.

Remember what I've been saying in every sermon every Sunday for the past few weeks. Before Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection can make any sense, it must all be put in the context of the kingdom of God emerging all around us.

Talking to Nicodemus, Jesus raised an essential teaching: the emergence of God's kingdom is a fundamental paradigm shift taking place within us and all around us. We enter the kingdom of God now, in the present tense, not in the future tense.

Remember what Jesus said, "...the kingdom of God is at hand, the kingdom of God is within you, the kingdom of God comes to earth when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven."

In other words, being born again means being reborn into that paradigm shift happening now within and around you. Rejecting this shift means staying stuck in old, decaying patterns and being left behind.

It's sort of like what's happening in the communications industry. Recently, announcements kept streaming across our TV screen telling us we had to upgrade our internet access or lose our high definition. It reminded me about having to get new TV set several years earlier. If I didn't, when I turned on my old set I'd get nothing since I refused to let go of the old to be embraced by the new.

Keep in mind Nicodemus was a renowned religious scholar. He spent his life immersed in the scriptures and pondering the mysteries of life. Nicodemus was a thoughtful, serious man. So why was he stumped by all this "born again" stuff.

I think if Nicodemus lived today he'd be a typical, lifelong Presbyterian. Believing in education, he'd approach his faith intellectually. He'd be an organization man, a believer in the system, always doing things "decently and in order." He'd follow the Golden Rule, pray every day, worship regularly and be a leader and his congregation.

But the older he got the more he got stuck in his ways, losing his youthful enthusiasm and love of risk-taking. To compensate, he'd look for solace in tried and true ways.

However, being a thoughtful man making time to dwell on these things, Nicodemus could recall that same youthful hunger for God's grace and that yearning for that sense of adventure he once had. Intrigued, he finally stepped into the darkness, hoping to stumble into the light, only to find Jesus again for the first time.

I think this is true. Deep down in even the most orthodox Presbyterian, there beats the heart of a nineteen-year-old waiting to be reborn into something new and redeeming.

Did you notice how Nicodemus came looking for Jesus at night? Most likely he didn't want to be seen by the other Pharisees but the unintended symbolism is unmistakable. Old, orthodox Nicodemus was getting in touch with his youthful idealism, and made the decision to

take the risk wandering in the dark long enough to stumble into the light. That's when he found Jesus.

John's Gospel doesn't tell us if Nicodemus was born again immediately but later we see Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea in broad daylight, carrying seventy- five pounds of myrrh and aloe on their way to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body.

By the end of the story, Nicodemus is born-again. But born again for what?

Let's talk again about paradigm shifts. When the time is right and the Kingdom comes to earth in all its glory, everything will be set to rights.

Think again about the revolution in broadcasting. When you turn in your old box to Verizon or Comcast for a new one, you're getting the best of the bargain. Making that basic shift, you're rewarded with clear images you never before thought possible.

Likewise, being born again into the reality of God's kingdom brings a new and wonderful worldview. Instead of seeing everything in black-and-white, you now see glorious colors. Seeing and believing outside the box, you become incredibly creative in your approach to life's problems and challenges.

Given new eyes of faith the world is seen from a radically different perspective. You now grasp what Jesus meant when he said things like, "The last shall be first and the first shall be last" and, "Whoever does the will of God is my mother brother and sister."

There's also a new appreciation for Jesus righteous anger directed towards abusive rulers and religious hypocrites. You might even find yourself remembering when you were an abusive ruler or religious hypocrite. No longer rationalizing your behavior, you repent and ask for forgiveness. At that moment, as Jesus said to the scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Something else starts happening. Since God so loved the world, you start loving the world. The world is no longer something to escape from but a place to serve in. because, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

Believing this, a new sense of obligation for your stewardship of the earth, along with the people and wildlife living in it takes hold. Caring for the creation and our fellow human beings becomes a new concern. Supporting activities to clean up our waterways and the air we breathe becomes a priority if not a calling.

A growing awareness that you are your brother's keeper and anyone in need is your neighbor spurs you on to become more involved in your neighborhood and beyond. You might even find yourself praying for opportunities to join with neighbors in your community or friends here church to get organized to do one thing that makes a difference.

To sustain your growth in Christ, making time to become more aware of God's presence in people and situations is essential to prevent burnout. That's why it's so necessary to pray and meditate on the scriptures and seeking out others in the beloved community to journey with you deeper into God's kingdom.

Doing any of these things keeps us focused on living in the present as if the future is already here. Heaven can wait. Make the most of your life now, as a living witness of God's grace and glory.

These are some of the symptoms of being born again, making the shift from worldly living to kingdom living. The question is are we willing to make that shift?

If old, orthodox Nicodemus could be born again and go on to risk his life and reputation by going to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, there's hope for all of us. By the grace of God, we can recapture our youthful idealism. That's when life begins again because you're born again in Christ.

Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless you were born again.'