

JOHN 3: 1-17
BORN AGAIN: A METAPHOR FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING
MARCH 20 2011 LENT 2

Being born again is not an expression that's used a great deal in our tradition, is it? At least to me, it seems to be associated with Christians who worship in the more fundamentalist traditions. And you know, that's a shame, really. It's a very good metaphor. A very expressive way of describing what it's like to come to know God and to be a follower of Jesus.

Before we explore the expression in more depth, though, I can't resist noting that if there ever was a warning from within scripture itself against approaching the Bible literally, here it is. Nicodemus is listening to Jesus' words, but the meaning is lost to him because he's taking him literally.

“How can you be born again after you're grown – can a person enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”

He just doesn't get it.

Now, psychologists would have quite a lot to say about entering the mother's womb a second time, but that's not our business here.

The point is that Nicodemus is kept from seeing the truth by his literalness of mind. This may not be for you, but for me it rings very true to my experience of scripture in general: that the Living Word of God emerges from its pages in layers of meaning that have to do with image and symbol and intuition; the meaning is more like a dance to the music of the spirit – around and around, or in patterns that make no sense to a mind accustomed to walking in a straight line or moving for function rather than pleasure. Like living water, filling and taking the form of the vessel that contains it rather than having a fixed form of its own.

I'm just saying that we have to be open to the layers of truth beyond and beneath the literal – and a prime example of that is here in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus.

You must be born again. Born anew. Born from above, the NRAV says.

Nicodemus can't grasp what that might mean.

What DOES it mean?

Being born in a physical way is quite a process. Often, when people say they've been born again, they seem to mean a sudden experience – one where you can say the time and the date. And that happens. And when it does it's wonderful. I know, too, that it doesn't happen that way for everyone, and the image of being born speaks to both these ways of coming into faith.

In physical birth, the birth itself happens only after a long period of development. First a seed is planted, then there is, in the case of humans, 9 months of growing, developing, changing, - incredible things have to happen to even get us to the point of being born.

And then the birth itself.

I have never had a baby myself. The closest I ever came to that was being in the delivery room with my

sister was giving birth to Kali – and that's the closest I ever WANT to get to that!

It is a painful, dangerous, completely amazing, breathtaking process. Incredible – really.

And after you're born – is that the end? Of course not – it's only the very beginning of a journey to becoming a human being able to function on your own.

At first, as a baby and a young child, you are dependent on others, totally self-absorbed....YOUR needs are the most important, and you look to others to take care of your needs. This is a natural, normal stage of development. As a teen then, it's your job to rebel, to test, and push the limits and shock your parents and question everything. This seems to be part of healthy personal development as well. Part of sorting out yourself from your parents, and learning to be independent. Finally as adults, we become, (one would hope) mature. Having figured out who we are for ourselves, instead of having someone else tell us who we are, we are then able to reach out to others, to handle life's ups and downs, its uncertainties,to realize that the universe does not revolve around us, that others have needs and experiences that are equally valid, and we're able to think of others as well as ourselves.

All of that is a long process of development starting with conception, through birth, and finally to maturity.

That's very like what happens when we become Christians – and sometimes we forget that.

There's a gestation period – seeds are planted (that might include things like infant baptism, Sunday school, discussions with others, reading.....) and the actual decision or birth might be quite painful. Like a physical birth, it can be quite a struggle. There's a safe, warm place to leave behind (and so no wonder the lectionary pairs this reading with the story of Abraham and Sarah who are called to leave behind their safe place, and enter a whole new world of uncertainty) and there's a cold and uncertain world outside.

Once you DO take that step, once you choose to be a follower of Jesus, is that the end? Not a chance. It's only the beginning.

There are definite stages we have to go through (no matter how old we are) before we reach spiritual maturity.

What I want to say today is ...well, there are two things:

- 1) Let's recognize the stages of spiritual growth in one another for what they are
 - 2) Let's honour one another in whatever stage we're in, trusting that eventually maturity will come.
- Each stage has much to offer the family.

People who have just been born, as it were, people just new to the faith, like babies, need to spend time being totally self-absorbed. Their needs their experiences, those things are paramount. Have you ever met someone newly arrived at a commitment to Jesus? The energy is high, they can't stop talking about it, it's *their* faith, *their* story and that's all that matters.

That's ok – that's good. They need that for survival, and they'll grow out of it. In the meantime though, they gift the family with enthusiasm and life and hope. You know the kind of energy that a newborn brings to the family? Same thing in a lot of ways. It's wonderful – but at the same time the family had

better be prepared to invest a lot of time and energy looking after them.

Do we do that?

With those who join us....say for example people recently confirmed or baptized....do we treat them like newborns and look after them and spend time energy so they can learn and grow?

I'd say in our church we're not very good at that. In fact, we often try to include them in the family by giving them a job. Would you serve on a committee? That's like saying to a new born – we all take turns doing the dishes in this family your night is Thursday.

It's also in this child state that people want all their needs looked after by the church. These are the people who understand that the ministry of the church is TO them and FOR them....not BY them. Do you know what I mean?

That's ok too – it's a necessary stage of faith development – but sometimes people get stuck there. It's for the family to gently help a child learn to take more and more responsibility – learn to give and take in the family, and so on.

How can we do that for people who perhaps need a little encouragement to move on? Adolescents, of course, are those who are questioning everything. Authority, accepted ways of doing things – pushing the leaders – wanting responsibility but not always accepting it once they have it. How do we handle that stage in our own families/ In ourselves? Have you ever come to that stage in your faith? Or met someone how is there?

It's a wonderful stage....and lots of positive changes have come because of that kind of thing (and in some ways, it can be a sign of the most maturity of all....) But this adolescent stage would also be marked, I think, by a pulling away from the family (you know...it's the “I don't need to go to church to be a Christian” thing)

What do we do when a brother or sister gets to that place? Or when that happens in our own faith life? It can be a healthy and necessary part of growing. ON the other hand, some people get stuck there. There are people my age who rebelled as teens and I go back home and they're still there and never got out of it. So how do we honour the stage but still keep growing?

Finally, we hope, we arrive at a maturity that allows us to think of others and honour their needs and experiences as well as our own. Where we can receive but also give ministry. Where we can think deeply, weigh things out critically, where our faith has become deeply and very personally real. In this stage we can reach out and share our faith in a way that doesn't make US the centre of things: we can challenge what needs to be challenged, without rejecting the whole thing. We can live with some ambiguity, live with decisions that we don't personally agree with and we can take responsibility as well.

Does this make sense at all?

What stage development would you say you're in right now? And of course, the truth is that often we are in more than one stage at once, some days a new born, some days mature, growing physically and spiritually is not a neat or linear process.

Wherever you are in your faith development, God is with you. And the spirit of God is able to birth you

over and over again. We must be born again. And again. And again.

And we commit ourselves to God, continue to ask questions, seek truth, learn to do justice and keep discovering the wonder of God's will and God's way for us.

Give yourself to the wonder of being reborn.

Celebrate the new life – the hope – the endless possibilities

cherish the questions and the doubts

accept the responsibilities and the mandate to share this experience and new life with others, so the circle of new birth can continue for them and for you.

You must be born again.

Let it be so....Amen.