

May the spirit of Justice, Peace, and Creativity flow through our congregation this morning; in what is said, in what is heard, and in what is faithful.

I want to start by asking a simple question inspired by the reading most versions of the gospel of John: Are you born again? Sounds simple enough. This was the requirement Jesus placed on Nicodemus: You must be born again to get into the kingdom of heaven. In the rise of the Evangelical Movement, this became one of the key doctrines. Maybe 50 years ago it became a rally cry answered by people who wanted something more than they had found in Congregational and other mainline churches. You may have seen your own family members depart the church of their parents and grandparents, looking for a *born-again* church community. Like Nicodemus, many of us also had difficulty grasping what it meant. In fact, to some of us, including myself, it seemed like the wrong question. It made a certain kind of emotional conversion experience be the entry to Christian faith. Jesus didn't seem to ask his disciples, for instance, to be "born again" before they could follow him. He just said, "follow me."

So, how would we answer the question about being "born-again Christians?"

I'll assume that in the congregation this morning, we'd hear lots of different answers. Some of you would just ask, "What do you mean?" "Why are you asking?" Some would suspect that the person asking the question may have an agenda. It could mean a lot of different things that only the asker knows.

Many of us would say, yes – I'm born again every morning when I wake up!" Every single day of life is a gift filled with the whisper of the sacred. And every day something inside of me dies and something else is reborn. So, yes; born-again.

Many of us could acknowledge moments of rebirth in our pattern of thinking about our place in the world.

- Those of us who have struggled with self-doubt or the consequences of poor decisions, but then suddenly realize that joy is possible: it's like being born again to a new day!
- Those of us who carry regret for what we did or didn't do in times long past, and then, suddenly let it go. Do you breathe the fresh air of forgiveness? That's being re-born.
- And what about those of us who have been misunderstood or offended by someone – and carry that hurt in our gut for years. When the moment comes and you realize that the pain no longer lives in you – and that you have released that offender from occupying space in your brain, -- it's being born again!

I'm thinking that few of us have exactly the right words to express what "born-again" means to us. So, here's how I process that

For millions of faithful, a “born-again Christian” referred to a Christianity shaped by a fundamentalist rebirthing of one’s spiritual identity. In the last century, it became a litmus test that told other people something they wanted to know about you – that you no longer held to the religion handed to you by your family – but that you had experienced Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior.

If you were “born-again,” you became something new -- it was an experience one was supposed to have to call oneself a follower of Jesus Christ.

Almost every version of the bible has Jesus saying that you must be “Born Again. But today’s reading is from the Contemporary English version of the Bible - and it doesn’t say, “Born Again.” It says, “Born from above. This is the thing about people who study the bible in its original languages – or in some other language. The French, for instance, don’t say, “Blessed are the meek,” but rather, “Blessed are the Debonair.”

We don’t really know what Jesus said in the moment. The Gospel of John wasn’t even written until 60 or 70 years had passed. How can you hang a whole belief system on just one paragraph of such a document. Seems to me you have to harvest all the gospels and see what they emphasize.

Here's one way to do it:

There are two turning points in the Gospels.

ONE, the story of Jesus' Baptism. Remember what happened when he came up out of the water? The clouds opened up and a voice from heaven spoke, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased!"

If those are the words Jesus heard? They caused him to completely change is direction. Immediately following that experience, he went off into the desert for those 40 days. When the time of temptation was over, he was a changed man. He immediately began his ministry of healing, teaching, and rabble rousing against the institutional religion of his day.

So that voice from above stood out in the memory of his baptism – and in the experience of many of us who suddenly hear that affirmation.

TWO, the story of the Transfiguration. He was up on the mountain with a handful of his sleepy disciples. They looked up and saw Jesus, Moses and Isaiah bathed in a brilliant light. And that same voice from above said, "This is my beloved son: Listen to him!"

That voice from above was surely one of the turning points in the way his disciples saw Jesus – and for many others throughout the centuries who have heard something similar.

So, this is how I look at that verse from John. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born from above, I think he is speaking of his own baptism experience – because it really transformed him. It's like a birth of enlightenment. Jesus was no longer defined and anchored in the culture of his region – he immersed as an authentic human.

Likewise, the church remembers the Transfiguration experience. When it remembers that voice from above, it hears an invitation to gain a new understanding of who Jesus was as the beloved of God.

I love the concept of being reborn. It's real. It's important. It suggests that every one of us has room to grow in our relationship to God and the rest of the creatures of the earth.

On those days when we feel that we are just treading water or just marking time, any of us might wish for a rebirth in our mind, body and spirit.

The Jesus I know is always asking us to wake up, to see the suffering of people we might otherwise walk by.

The Jesus I know would never dictate a particular emotional experience of being born-again. I think he would be our partner in the continuous search for truth and in the renewal of our lives.

Our world is waking up to the threat of a world-wide corona virus pandemic. None of us knows what will happen. Will we have to quarantine ourselves in our rooms? Will we have adequate medical care when we all need it at the same time? Will any of us here have to face the possibility of death? There's talk about something called the "Death Café" – a program where people can talk about death without hesitation or fear.

Will it be like one of those forecast 12-inch snowstorm that never comes? Or will it indeed bring sickness and death to our doorsteps? It all seems unreal, but pretending there is no threat should not be an option. Maybe this epidemic will be a wake-up call – that calls us out of complacency and into authenticity.

It will reshape our lives – at least for awhile; let's hold one another in prayer and do our part to keep the virus from spreading.

May all the beloved of God hear that voice from above and trust the voices of wisdom and truth. Amen.