

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, February 17, 2008  
Rev. John Tapscott

“BORN AGAIN...DON’T BE SURPRISED”

John 3:1-17; (sermon text v. 7)

Some of us are night people; we are rather slow in the morning but come alive in the evening and do our best work after the sun goes down. Others are morning people. We’re asleep by 10 P.M. and ready to go first thing in the morning, before the sun rises. I’m a night person and I’ve seen a few people checking their watches as I arrive at the last minute for early morning gatherings.

Now Jesus shared all our human limitations, but we don’t know whether he was a night person or a day person. But we can say that Jesus was and is a man for all times, including the wee small hours when darkness closes in upon us. He is our comfort and our light in every hour of the night or day. Now Jesus conducted most of his public ministry in the light of day, but John records for us a memorable encounter Jesus had at night. In John 3:1 we read, “A Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we’ve seen the works you are doing and we know that God is with you.” Did Nicodemus come as a representative of the Sanhedrin? Or did he come on his own, with some personal spiritual questions? The latter seems more likely, since at night he wouldn’t be seen by members of the Sanhedrin or the community. They certainly would have questioned a pillar of the establishment seeking out this itinerant Galilean preacher and miracle worker.

But no matter what drove Nicodemus to see Jesus, Jesus came right to the heart of the matter. The first words he said to Nicodemus were, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again (and this term “born again” can also be translated as “born anew,” or “born from above”, as some versions do).” Nicodemus was apparently surprised by Jesus’ direct approach and he asked, “How can a person enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?” But Jesus was talking about a spiritual birth, a birth from above. And Nicodemus should have known that. After all, he was a son of Israel, who knew about God’s powerful ruach, God’s spirit at work in Israel. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, Nicodemus, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, and spirit gives birth to spirit. You must not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.”

Now this term “born again,” and the injunction, “You must be born again”, have caused

division within the Christian community. Jesus didn't intend that to happen. But it has. Some Christians describe themselves as "born-again" and make that experience definitive for the Christian life. I attended a funeral service for a person last summer and the funeral bulletin included three dates on the cover - "Born September 17, 1950, Born again April 26, 1985, Home to Heaven June 24, 2007." In fact the bulletin included words he said on the day he was born again. "It is enough! That Jesus died and rose again for me!!"

Friends, I'm not critical of that. I know that something significant happened in the life of that person on April 26, 1985. And the members of Church to which he belonged, all of whom define themselves as "born-again", are filled with much love and gentleness and kindness. You can tell by their fruits that their lives really are being formed and shaped by God's Spirit.

Now most of us would not think of ourselves as "born-again" Christians in this sense. I can't name a specific date on which I was born again. I don't believe that makes me a second-class Christian. But if you can go to the extreme of defining the Christian life in terms of being born again at a specific time and place, the other and even more extreme danger would be to ignore the second birth altogether. For Jesus made it clear that to be "born again" (which can also be mean "born anew" or "born from above") is central to the Christian life. He doesn't want us to ignore it or to be surprised by it. Jesus says, 'You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." (John 3:7)

*Note first, that Jesus stresses it's necessity.*

Verse 3, "I tell you the truth no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again." Verse 5, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.'

Now Jesus described the need for spiritual birth in more than one way. One time he said, "Unless you turn and become as children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God." Another time he said, "Anyone who would be my disciple must take up their Cross and follow me." To a rich young ruler who wanted to know how to inherit eternal life, he said, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." These were all ways of stressing the necessity of being born from above.

Now we treasure and give God thanks for each child. There are no accidents from God's perspective. Each child comes from his creative will and purpose. Each is born from above in that sense. But Jesus says that physical birth is not enough. He says that if our lives are going to have eternal significance and not be lost, if we are going to become the people God wants us to be and that we can be, if we are going to enter and usefully serve God's Kingdom

in this world and the next then we must be born again. The preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, "So many church members are secondhand Christians. They have inherited it from their families, borrowed it from their friends, married it, taken it over like the cut of their clothes from the fashion of their group." But according to Jesus, borrowed faith is not enough. The second birth, the personal coming to faith, is a necessity. God's love and God's grace and God's reign must take hold of us in a personal way. So Jesus says, "You must not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again."

*Jesus not only tells us about the necessity of the second birth; he tells us that it is rather mysterious.* He said, "Listen to the wind. It blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes." (3:8)

Now in this day of computer models and long range weather forecasting, we better understand the nature of winds. We see how storm systems gather and move and we can accurately predict the weather they bring. But winds come from any direction and at various speeds, and we don't control them. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. In this day and age, when we want to take control of every aspect of our lives, there are still things we can't control. One of them is the weather, another is the stock market, another is the time and place of our physical birth, yet another is the way in which God's Spirit brings about the second birth in us. In some people God's Spirit acts like a mighty gust; in others, it's like a gentle breeze. That's why even if someone can name the date and place they were born again, they can't expect that all who are born again to do the same thing.

God's Spirit blows where it wills. It's mysterious and unpredictable. It blows now towards this person, then towards that one, now towards this church and then towards another. But I believe that in his love God directs his Spirit towards everyone at one time or another, hoping to find an open door. What we can do is to open a door so that when the Spirit comes he can enter in and do his work. The baptism of these children opens the door for God's Spirit to begin his work in their lives. Mother Teresa once said, "It is very, very important that families teach their children to pray and pray with them." I would add that worshipping as a family is very important too. We open the door for God's Spirit to do his work through worship and prayer, through proclaiming and teaching and hearing the Gospel. We open the door by reading God's word and seeking to walk in his way.

God's Holy Spirit blows where it wills and we can't control it. But there are ways we can open the door for God's Spirit to enter in to our lives and the lives of others. Nicodemus opened the door for God's Spirit when he came to Jesus by night. And it seems something came alive in him for he was one of two Jewish leaders who courageously went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body after he had been crucified. They took Jesus' body down from the Cross and provided him with a decent burial. That set the stage for God's Spirit to move with

great power on Easter day when God raised Jesus from the grave to live forevermore, confirming Jesus as the Son of God and confirming everything Jesus did and said as God's work and God's truth. So Jesus was speaking God's truth when he said, "You must not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again."

*Finally, Jesus tells us what it means to be born again.*

It is perhaps simpler than we think though still very profound. Following directly on the necessity and the mystery of being "born again" comes the most beloved and most quoted passage in Scripture, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believe in Him may not perish but have eternal life." You see, to be born again is not to have a particular experience, it is to have a particular faith. It is to believe in God's only Son, the living Lord Jesus Christ. It is to trust in Christ fully as the one who saves you from perishing and brings you now and forever into the realm of God.

Look, it is false to say that some Christians are born again and some are not. All true Christians have been born again. If you live with an awareness of God's love and grace, if you desire to serve Jesus and his church, if your heart's desire is to become Christ-like, if you know he is the One who has secured for you the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life, then you have been born from above. Somewhere along the way you have opened the door and the Spirit of God entered mysteriously and powerfully, and worked in you the miracle of faith. And I call it a miracle, because we don't come into the world as believers. God himself by the work of the Spirit brings us to the point of acceptance, belief and commitment to Jesus Christ. You may not know when and you may not be able to explain how it happened. But if you are trusting in God's Son and following Him, you can say that you have been born again, that you have been born from above, that you have been born anew. And you can be thankful.

We can also be thankful that God's Spirit is powerfully and mysteriously active in the world, moving in people's lives and bringing them to faith. That's what we try to do every week in and through this church - open the door for God's mysterious and powerful Spirit to blow in, so that people may be born of the Spirit, that their faith may come alive or be renewed, and that believing in Christ they may have life in His Name. Jesus said "Do not be surprised that I say to you, "You must be born again." By God's grace it has happened to many of us here, and by God's grace and power it may be happening to some of you today.

