***“Born Again”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, March 8, 2020

**Romans 4:1–5, 13, 16**

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 2For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ 4Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 5But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. . .

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. . . .

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace.

**John 3:1–8**

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.2He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” 3Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” 4Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” 5Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

There is a mystery about each of the New Testament passages today. Now, a mystery can be wonderful, if it stimulates interest, and leads to a determination to find the truth. Nicodemus is sincere. He is coming to Jesus for answers. Maybe we can see ourselves in Nicodemus. He’s an honest seeker. As his understanding begins to grow, his walk with God will grow deeper and wider.

But Jesus’ answer has some mystery in it. To understand it we have to wrestle with the phrase “born again” or “born from above.” Actually, the New Testament Greek is the same. The saying can be translated either way. I have used “born again” for verse 3, but “born from above” for verse 7. I think we need both translations to get the sense. The term “born again” is familiar, vivid, and useful, but what does it mean? It’s not immediately clear. The other translation choice helps to illuminate it. “Born from above” means spiritually reborn, since the spiritual realm is thought of as being “above” the material realm. That helps a little, but we still need to unfold the “born from above” idea.

Jesus addresses it very simply: “what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (3:6). This means that the Spirit seems to cause certain behavior. We can draw upon other Scriptures to fill this out. Paul says “if we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25), and he lists qualities that constitute the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, self-control, and others (5:22–23). So being born from above or born of the Spirit means a change of life and behavior. In fact, it means gaining a new and *spiritual* motivation for living. When we accept Jesus, we become *motivated* by love, peace, and generosity. When we take in the Spirit, we gain a new reason for living. *That* is what being born anew means. What we *value* the mostgets changed. Ego and self will subside, and the desire to do good, to discern truth, to practice kindness, and to appreciate beauty and unity will become paramount. Deciding to trust Jesus means deciding to do the will of God.

There’s a pleasant paradox here. We don’t normally think of being a *follower* as leading to *freedom*, but being a follower of Jesus *does* give us a new freedom. That is because the values we gain are agreeable to our spiritual nature. They encourage creativity and play. We do not all manifest these values exactly identically. Jesus refers both to the *following* and to the *freedom* when he says “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (3:8). He is saying that you will be led around, as by the wind, but you will also get a feeling of freedom from this spiritual breeze. The Spirit may take you to new places you can hardly imagine—to a new life of learning and serving.

None of this is just cold and abstract truth, or rigid and dogmatic rules. The emphasis is on *living* truth, *relational* goodness, and *creative* beauty. Life with Jesus is lively and ever dynamic. And this leads me to the main point I want to draw out of the Romans passage, which is that we are saved by a deep, living trust.

The primary meaning of the word “*faith*” is *trust*. Paul is stressing that we are saved by faith, and by “grace,” not by works of the law. He uses Abraham to illustrate his point. Abraham was willing to trust a promise from God, and *that* gets him deemed righteous. Paul’s point is that long before Jesus, and long before Moses, Abraham’s *faith* caused him to be reckoned righteous. After that, Abraham takes certain steps to show that he is serious about his faith commitment. But first it was God’s promise, God’s graciousness, that saved him. God’s grace in Paul’s passage can be equated with the wind of the Spirit in Jesus’ saying. It makes us reborn from above, gaining a new reason for living, helping us over time to develop an abiding trust.

When we are really born from above, we become spiritually serious, and yet we gain a lighthearted confidence. “So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (3:8). So it is with you! Some things you’re in charge of, and some are in God’s charge. Fortunately, God is not setting out to put us on trial and condemn us. God has a more fatherly attitude than that. Jesus did not call God the Judge or the King, but the Father. The Father loves us, and we are saved by God’s grace.