

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

Sometimes something as worldly as Facebook can intersect with our lives in an unexpected way. Such was the case for me yesterday evening. The annual Vestry Retreat had been earlier in the day and I had been distracted and tied up on Friday, so by last evening, I hadn't yet written the sermon. I'd thought about it a lot, but I hadn't put anything down on paper. While I was procrastinating in writing the sermon, I distracted myself by scrolling through Facebook. Low and behold, one of the first posts I saw was from a fellow classmate of mine from VTS...a dear friend named George...that I'm still in contact with. This is what George's post said:

"In writing my sermon for tomorrow, I realized that I am like Nicodemus. I don't fully get the rebirth thing. I sometimes resist the possibility and hope of it because any real rebirth seems so uncertain, painful and scary. But, I also know that I routinely need rebirth physically, spiritually and emotionally, especially at times like these when fear, anxiety and paranoia threaten to swamp us all. The words of Gabriel Garcia Marquez below capture where I am today...with apologies to the author for amending the last phrase to jive with my theology."

Here's the quote which is an excerpt from [Love in the Time of Cholera](#).

"He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves (with God's help)."

All I could think of to reply was, "You read my mind. I'm right there with you George."

His response made me laugh: "Thanks, friend. Good to know I am not alone. And you got better grades than me in seminary." I didn't, but he still cracks me up! The whole born again thing is a mystery as are so many of our exchanges with God. Things happen that we can explain no other way than to attribute them to God. Points of view change. Old grudges evaporate. Perspectives become broader. The capacity to forgive and to love becomes greater. All the things that move us closer to being prepared to enter the kingdom of God seem to happen...with our permission...but not with our own agency. We aren't the ones who give ourselves new life. God does that.

But let's take a step back in recent history to see where the term Born Again Christian came from and what did it mean. Historically, the term has been around periodically for many centuries. But I'm thinking about it's most recent use which many of us probably still remember or have experienced. It may mean different things to everyone here this morning, but it's a term that's part of our culture, so we should probably examine it. The term came into prominence in this country in the late 1960's and early 1970's. In some ways it was a response to the unprincipled chaos of the 1960 which produced its own intense high anxiety for all of us. The term Born Again Christian was an antidote to that cultural chaos. It's based on this passage from John that we just heard describing Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus and Jesus' teaching of the need for all of us to be born from above to be prepared for the kingdom of heaven. I have such empathy for Nicodemus because...like him...I tend to be pretty literal. Nicodemus couldn't wrap his brain around what Jesus was saying. "How can a grown man get back inside his mother's womb and be born again?" So Jesus tries to explain about being born from above (God has to initiate this!) and the fact that it's like the wind in that you can't see it. You can feel it and you can see the effects of it, but you can't see it. Don't be so literal, Nicodemus!

The Born Again phenomenon was fascinating, but being 'born again' didn't seem to produce the kinds of people that seemed to me to be prepared for the kingdom of heaven. Among the people I knew, it was a pejorative term equivalent to calling someone a 'Crazy Christian' or it was an exclusionary term designating who were the chosen ones who had been saved by the experience of being born again and who were the ones who had been excluded...passed over...and left out of this salvation experience. 'If someone who felt they were a born again Christian asked you if you were one, they were trying to find out if you were one of 'us' (the saved) or one of 'them' (the unsaved). It was clearly a way to establish one's own superiority. These are the folks who could generally tell you the date and time when they had been reborn. If you asked my Mother if she had been reborn, her pat answer always was, "Why, yes. Every single day!" I always liked that. Any theology that divides Christians into 'them' and 'us' categories is flawed theology. Just be aware that such division is a warning sign and is not of God. God doesn't divide us. God loves each and every one of us. And God tells us quite emphatically not to judge each other.

Being spontaneously born again is probably a really dramatic experience as are most experiences of God. And we've all had them in one form or another. Some are spontaneous and some are quite gradual. When we have a sudden change of heart about something that has been troubling us...that's a little rebirth. If we experience a sudden new insight into an old problem that changes our perspective radically...that's a little rebirth. If we go to sleep at night with something weighing heavy on our heart and we wake up to find it lifted...that's a little rebirth. There are all kinds of subtle, but meaningful ways, that God works on us and changes

us. It's a gradual thing for many of us...not a sudden and bursting jolt that changes us radically, although I'm sure it's possible for it to happen that way. Personally, and I expect God knows this, I do much better with gradual change than radical change. And many of us do.

The thing is, we don't precipitate this 'born again' thing...spontaneous rebirth or gradual rebirth. God is the one who does that...with our permission or even at our request, usually...although I don't think Saul gave God permission to knock him off his horse, render him blind for several days, and change him so radically that his name was changed to Paul. Now that was a Born Again experience, but notice that neither Paul nor God used it as a way to divide people. As a matter of fact, Paul spent his ministry being inclusive about being a disciple of Christ. The Gospel that Paul preached was that Jesus' gift of salvation was for everyone...not just the Jews...the chosen people of Israel...but for the Gentiles as well...all the rest of us.

One of the things we all need to be aware of in asking God to come into our lives is that...He will do just that! If we invite Him; He will come. Case in point was the Vestry Retreat we had yesterday at St. Alban's. We began in silence and then with a prayer and we specifically asked God to be with us as we moved through the day and all the topics we needed to discuss. You'll have to ask the individual members of the Vestry what their personal experience was, but mine was one of surprise and satisfying exhaustion at the end of the Retreat...sure signs to me that God has been present. I've attended and presided over many, many Vestry Retreats in my life, but none has been like the one we had yesterday. We got down to brass tacks. We laughed a lot. We good-naturedly teased each other. We had disagreements that we ended amicably. We made plans for the future and individuals took responsibility for shepherding those plans to fruition. By the end of our time together, it felt to me as if there had been a force among us that I had never before experienced in quite the same way. In some very profound ways, it felt like God had joined us. God has shown us. And perhaps the trajectory of St. Paul's shifted a bit. It felt as though we were being guided and it felt like we were on the verge of new birth. We'll see. But it was different...decidedly different. There was a sense of reassurance when all was said and done.

In the midst of a world that showers us with fear and anxiety on an almost hourly basis, what a refuge we find in God's precious Son, Jesus. He walks with us every step of the way. And our own experiences with rebirth will be precipitated by God...especially if we invite Him in.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.