

“Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind”

Date: March 8, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 3:1-17

Occasion: Lent 2, Year A

Themes: New Life, Born Again

Are you born again? Do you even know what that question means? I think there was a time when a majority of people knew what it meant, whether they had the experience or not. To be born again, in popular understanding, means to come to the awareness that you're a sinner; to feel sorry for your sin and then to ask Jesus to forgive you.

But BAM; something happened. People weren't so sure of what it meant, or whether they had ever experienced anything like that. For some people the experience was quick and instant. You could point to the day and the hour and tell people, "I was *born again* on March 8, 1960, or 1980 or 2020."

But for other people, they couldn't tell you when it happened. It was a very slow process. For them, the change happened slowly and gradually, and it was only by looking back that they could say, "You know what, I'm different. Jesus changed me."

Today though, people are less sure of their religious experience. More people are mistrustful of religious institutions. They mistrust religious language, and they frequently mistrust people who ask them, "Are you born again?" Or, "Are you saved?" For many people, that kind of religious language offends them. And yet, people are still deeply hungry for an experience of God.

Perhaps the phrase "born again" has been overused, misused and maybe even misunderstood. But to many people it is no longer a helpful invitation to know God in a deeper way. It really offends a lot of people,

often times reminding them of a time when they or someone they know was spiritually abused by a church – made to conform to a set of values that are more man-made than God-given. “Be like us, or else you’re going to hell,” seems to be the motto of some churches.

And yet, for all of the spiritual abuse and misuse of biblical language, people are still hungering for God. They’re tired of church, but they’re looking to quench their spiritual thirst. They mistrust institutions, but deeply want to experience the wonder and awe of the universe. People are weary of the same old, tired, boring religion of their parents or grandparents.

They want something new that speaks to their experience. Surprisingly that something new is actually something old. We preachers call it grace. That simply means it’s God’s gift. It’s not something we do, or that we create. It means that God comes to us in surprising ways, when and where God decides.

Jesus talked to Nicodemus about it. He said, “No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. You must be born from above. 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.”

Paul says it happens by faith. He says it’s not something we do, or something we earn. God does it; we *accept* it by faith. It is a gift. We are saved by grace through faith; a gift we receive. It is freely given. We accept it. We accept that we are accepted by God; saved by grace through faith.

Nicodemus was tired of the same old religion too. He knew there had to be more than simply keeping the commandments. He knew there had to be more; that’s why he went to see Jesus, to try to figure out what Jesus had that he didn’t. There was something different about this man.

The first thing we can say about Nicodemus is that he was already a religious man. He clearly knew and understood what the Scriptures said. He had memorized large sections of it. If anyone knew about God, surely it would have been this man.

And yet, Nicodemus was not a fulfilled man. For all of his religious experience, there was still an emptiness within him. It was as if he said to Jesus, “Master, I know all of the commandments, but something is missing.”

John Wesley’s story is likewise familiar. The son of an Anglican priest, educated at Oxford University, ordained as an Anglican priest himself, John Wesley came from a religious family and grew up in the Christian faith. And yet he was still restless, unfulfilled.

Wesley was already 35 years old when he brought himself into contact with the Moravian missionaries in London. He was attending a Bible study on Aldersgate Street, when the Bible study leader began reading a passage from Martin Luther on the introduction to the book of Romans. And Wesley “felt his heart strangely warmed.”

Now, at the age of 35 he felt the love of God penetrate his mind in such a way that – with a third of his life already over – he was a changed person. That experience on Aldersgate Street shaped the remaining 2/3’s of his life.

Was he a Christian before? Assuredly. But something had changed. Something had shifted. His relationship with God was made new. Did he work to make it happen? No. Did he strive to earn it? He had worked hard at his spiritual disciplines all of his life, but that didn’t give him this peace and “warm heart” that he talks about. Rather, it came over him. Hmmm.

Fast forward a few centuries, a young businessman is rushed to the hospital in serious condition. A doctor predicted he might die. Not a religious man at the time, he did however turn on the radio and he heard a Christian song being played: “God Will Take Care of You.”

He said he couldn’t get that song out of his mind. He began to pray, and as he did, he reported a sense of energy flowing in. It was near Christmas, a Sunday morning. He heard a group of nurses having a brief worship service in a nearby room. He struggled to get out of bed and he joined them. While there, he committed his life to Jesus Christ.

That man recovered. Thereafter, for the rest of his life, he remained faithful to his commitment. He referred every business and every personal decision he made to God. He was resolute in his ethics, living by the teachings of Jesus.

You’ve heard of this man, who told all in a book about his life. His name was J.C. Penney. Another life testimony, that when Jesus comes into a person’s life, they are never the same. Born anew; they’re changed.

Nicodemus, Wesley, J.C. Penney – they were all men whose lives were changed by a close encounter of the Jesus kind. When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born anew, or born again, or born from above – however you translate that phrase, Jesus is essentially telling Nicodemus that salvation is primarily God’s work, not ours.

We need to be open and available to what God’s Spirit will do in us. We can’t put God in a box and explain how or when or why people change. God is the one who does the changing; God is the one who does the saving, not us. We are saved by grace, through faith. It’s a gift we accept. Our job is simply to receive it when it is offered.

As Christians, we witness to the fact that when you get close to Jesus, things happen. Lives are changed. To be born again, to be born from above is talking about a new life. As Christians, we don't simply make a few minor adjustments. When we allow Jesus to get close to us, inside our hearts, we give Him permission to remake us.

Most of us resist that total makeover, preferring a few modifications here and there, but basically going along as we have always done. But God's amazing love is meant to transform us. That's the testimony of JC Penny, and John Wesley, and countless others who let Jesus get close.

Once, there was a small jazz club in New Orleans. In a corner of that club sat an old dilapidated piano. All of the jazz artists complained about this antiquated instrument. The piano players dreaded playing on it. The vocalists dreaded singing with it. All of the combos that played that club wished they could bring in their own piano – just like they could bring in a saxophone or trumpet.

Finally, after years of listening to these jazz musicians complain about his piano, the owner of the club decided to do something about it. He had the piano painted.

That's not the witness of Nicodemus, who was there with Joseph of Arimathea after the crucifixion. He risked his career and became a Jesus follower, assisting in his burial. That's not the witness of John Wesley, whose preaching became empowered and founded one of the great denominations of the world. That's not the witness of JC Penny, who committed his life to Christ and was never the same again.

These men were born again, and their lives were changed. Has Jesus changed you? If not, then pray for a close encounter of the Jesus kind. Amen. Let us pray.