

Living the New Birth in Lent
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In the presidential campaign of 1975-76, the ex-governor of Georgia Jimmy Carter said three things that shocked the nation. The first was that he intended to be the next president of the United States. In Georgia the headlines of the Atlanta Constitution read in bold black script, "JIMMY CARTER IS RUNNING FOR WHAT?" His second astonishing announcement came in an interview ultimately published in Playboy in which a reporter asked him if he had ever been unfaithful to his wife. Thinking of Jesus' strict teachings on adultery, Carter confessed that he had lusted in his heart and so was guilty of adultery – a confession everyone in this sanctuary could make. Yet a voyeuristic nation rushed out to read the interview --- with the ironic results that a Southern Baptist Sunday School teacher was responsible for selling the most copies of a single issue in Playboy history. But the third perplexing announcement: when asked about his religion Carter identified himself as a "Born Again" Christian. To be sure, the terms "new birth" or "born again" or "born of the Spirit" are prominent in the parlance of evangelicals or charismatics, but they are also part of that Biblical language embraced by all traditions of the Christian church. Yet the media found themselves embarrassingly speechless. What did he mean that he was "born again"? Although this reaction reveals how superficially religious our nation is and how out of touch on matters of religion the media are, this reaction is not without precedence.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cloak of night– even before he could ask whatever question he came to ask –Jesus said to him "Truly, truly I say unto you unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Now Nicodemus was neither a ignorant nor an impious man. Not only was he a Pharisee – that sect of Jews who were scrupulous in their faithful adherence to the Law of Moses – but he was also a member of the Sanhedrin, that ruling council which governed internal Jewish affairs. Moreover, he had seen Jesus' works and heard his teachings and rightly concluded that these were signs that Jesus was a great teacher sent by God. Yet Jesus said that one must be "born again" Nicodemus was at a loss for words. Taking Jesus literally, he asks, "How can a person reenter her mother's womb and be born a second time?" Jesus, ever the patient teacher, restates his point, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." His piety and perceptivity are not enough; for Jesus is clear that being "born again" is a precondition for entry into his Kingdom. I suspect that for all of us, whether we are just beginning to explore the Gospel probing it for signs of truth or are newly baptized into the faith or have been a part of the Church all our lives, Jesus' words are just as much an enigma to us as they were to Nicodemus. This morning as we think on this passage from John's Gospel I want us to probe two questions. First, why is this new birth necessary in order to see and participate in Christ's kingdom? And second, what is the relationship between being born again and the disciplines of Lent in preparation for Easter?

Jesus' reference to the "Kingdom of God" in this passage is curious. In John's Gospel there is only one other place Jesus makes mention of the Kingdom of God. By contrast, in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospel's the language of "the Kingdom of God" or "The Kingdom of Heaven" is very heart of Jesus' message. The first words we hear the adult Jesus' declare at the beginning of his ministry are "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel." Most all of Jesus' parables are about the Kingdom of God. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom, he is referring both to Christ's triumphal and liberating reign that will come at the end of time, at the resurrection of the dead but also to the ways that God rules over his creation in the here and now – most of all in the presence of Christ in our midst. For the God we worship is not the God of deism who, having created the world, stepped back leaving to run its course without any involvement or interference from its creator. One is left wondering why such a disinterested God would have created the world to begin with? No, the God we worship – the only sort of God worthy of our devotion – is a God actively involved in the lives of creatures ever seeking to bring them to that end for which he created them in first place. This is the kingdom. Yet Jesus tells Nicodemus and us, "You can't see the kingdom, you can't see God's working in the world around us and within unless you are born again of the Holy Spirit.

When the Church speaks of our being "born of the Spirit" is making a fundamentally mystical claim that the Spirit of the living God, the very Spirit of Christ descends upon us and dwells within us. Even as in the Incarnation, God joined his divine Word with a human being thereby equipping Jesus for a holiness of life manifest in faithful obedience, even unto death on a cross, similarly when we are born of the Spirit God pours out his Spirit upon us, uniting Christ's Spirit with our spirit that we might become children of God restoring to us a likeness of the holiness of our heavenly Father. The point is God did not simply give us Christ as a moral example whose life we then imitate. As if, in order to be holy, all one had to do was ask "what would Jesus do in this situation?" God not only gave us Christ's example he gives us Christ's Spirit who empowers us for holiness.

What is this holiness which begins to grow within us when we are born of the Spirit? It is not simply the renunciation of this sins and vices of our past. It is something more fundamental: a shifting our focus from the things of the world to the things of the Spirit. For when we are born again our soul is awakened to the presence of God's Spirit. In his sermon in titled "The New Birth", John Wesley describes the phenomenon of being born again using the metaphor of the embryo. In her mother's womb, a child's eyes are closed and her ears are blocked. She is oblivious to the world that lies beyond the dark and warmth of the womb. But once she is born, her eyes are opened and her ears are unplugged. As she is bombarded with the senses of sight and sound she becomes fully alive for she becomes conscious of an entire world beyond herself. So too when we are born of the Spirit, Wesley says, "the eyes of our understanding are opened," and "our ears hear the inward voice of God saying 'Be of good cheer your sins are forgiven you. Go and sin no more.'" We "feel in our hearts to mighty workings of the Spirit of God," and we are filled with peace and joy. Now the analysis behind Wesley's analogy suffers from two limitations. The first is that Wesley was a man who never lived with the pregnant

woman or a newborn child. And second as a man of the 18th-century Wesley lacked our 21st-century understanding of child development. But the theological point of Wesley's metaphor is on target. From we are born of the Spirit, the eyes and ears of our soul will become conscious of the invisible reality of the Spirit. And as our minds become conscious of the stirrings of the Holy Spirit it shifts its focus from the sensible things of the world to the invisible things of God. As Paul tells the Romans, "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." When we are born in the Spirit, when we are conscious of the inward stirrings of God's Spirit then our thoughts and our affections and our dreams become shaped, not only by our empirical experience of the world, but also by our empirical experience of the Holy Spirit.

So what does this reorientation of the soul -- this being born of the Spirit -- have to do with Lent? What do Jesus' words to Nicodemus mean for us on the road to Jerusalem? Being born of the Spirit has everything to do with lent. After all what is the chief purpose of Lenten disciplines except to simplify and order our lives so that our minds may be attentive to the soft and subtle movements of God's Spirit. Most the time unfortunately our lives are so busy. The immediately important but ultimately trivial things divert our mental and emotional energies from the things that are ultimately important. We all are, as T. S. Eliot wrote, "distracted from distraction by distraction." Lenten disciplines clear away the distractions so that we might be centered upon what is ultimately important. For example, fasting is not simply giving up food. To abstain from eating for a long period of time is not intrinsically spiritual; it is simply following the dietary practices of anorexic supermodels. A true and spiritual fast, by contrast, entails breaking away from the fellowship of the dinner table so that we might withdraw into a private space to pray and to read and to meditate so that our minds may discern the calling of God.

This is the essence of holiness. This is living according to the Spirit: to discern the Spirit's presence and to follow in faith where the Spirit is leads. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the most influential bishops of early church, made an important distinction between knowing and discerning. Knowing is the natural capacity we have to make judgments about the world based on our perceptions of how it works. Knowing what is good is necessary in order for us to survive and thrive in the world. Knowing is concerned with data which together with understanding is the raw material of prudence -- assessing the relative merits of competing or conflicting goods. This institution, as all schools of higher learning, is a temple dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge. We value knowledge so highly because daily we see how dangerous ignorance can be. We take as our fundamental assumption the Greek maxim that "to know the good is to do the good." And we take as our hope the conviction of the more knowledge you, our students, gain here and now the more prudent choices you will make both for yourself and for the sake of the world. But knowledge is not discernment. Even religious knowledge -- which grasps that God is the highest good and there should for should be loved and obeyed above all -- is not discernment. Knowing is a capacity common to all human beings. Discerning, however, Gregory of Nyssa says, is the mark of a spiritual person. For discerning is not concerned with the facts in evidence. Nor does it grasp a general

principle of right or wrong, good or bad. Rather discerning apprehensions the mysterious movements of God's Spirit. And the movements of the Spirit are mysterious. For as Jesus tells Nicodemus: the wind blows where it will --- it brushes against our cheek and in our hair – but whence it comes and whither it goes we do not know. Discerning is hearing the voice of God calling you to be a part of some purpose or plan which is beyond the scope of our knowledge or understanding. At age 75 Abraham was comfortably established in the city of Ur there in the fertile land of the Mesopotamian river valley. Scripture tells us that he was a wealthy man not only owning much gold and silver but possessing vast herds of cattle. He also had servants to tend to the needs of his kin and his cattle. To Abraham the voice of prudence would have said, "You are an old man. You have had a long and hard life. Now take your ease. Stay where you are and live out your final years in peace in the land of your fathers." But Abraham did not listen to the voice of prudence. He discerned the call of God's Spirit, "Go from your country and kindred and your father's house to land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation...by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Abraham discerned God calling him to something that was beyond the scope of his knowledge. God did not even tell him where he was to go. Nor did go reveal Abraham's place in his plan. Rather the voice of God is simply said, "Set off on your journey and along the way I will show you where I want you to go." Moreover, to childless Abraham, God gave the seemingly hopeless promise, I will make you father of a great nation. Abraham did not have knowledge. All he had was an ambiguous call and an improbable promise. Yet Abraham set off in faith going where he discerned God to be leading him. This is what Paul means when he exhorts us, "Walk by faith not by sight."

This is the faith that was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. This is the faith, Paul says, by which we are justified. Now when we read Paul's discussion of faith and works in Romans we often create a false dichotomy: faith is the *passive* trust in the promise of forgiveness whereas works are our *active* obedience by which we seek to merit salvation. But the faith which Paul praises is not a passive trust or mere acceptance of what God has done for us. No, the faith which justifies is an *active trust* in God. Abraham's faith was active. Leaving one's country and one's kin and one's fathers house and following go to a place heaven only knows where is an act of radical obedience far exceeding any obligation imposed on us by the Law of Moses.

The faith which justifies, however, cannot be understood as confidence in our own power or ability. Rather it is a trust in the Spirit -- a trust that the Spirit who has call to us will enable us to do that thinking which he is called us to do. As Paul puts it, God will bring to completion the good work that he has begun in us. Trusting in the grace and power of the Spirit in this is the character of one who is born-again. This is the faith which justifies.

In Lent, we hear Christ calling us to go with him to Jerusalem. To us he says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me," -- a calling even more demanding than the one go it issued to Abraham. The only way we can follow is if we are born of Christ's Spirit and so trust that the Spirit will strengthen us on the way to Good Friday and then will raise us in glory on Easter.