

BORN AGAIN

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Isaiah 6: 1-8

Romans 8: 12-17

John 3: 1-17

What a perfect time of year to talk about being born again. The spring is the actuality for the metaphor that we use over and over again, when we do, in fact, see the world around us being reborn, when the landscape that was just the other day a bleak and dismal scan is now bursting with green leaves and blossoms, when the earth seems to offer forth new progeny each time that we look about. We waited so long, and yet all of a sudden it seems so easy to be born again. All you have to do is wait, and if you wait long enough, then it happens.

When you travel around to different places one of the things that is interesting to do is to go to church. Not necessarily because of what that practice may contribute to one's life, but also because of the window that it gives one into the community that you are visiting. So we were in Florida once in a rather elegant town and we went to an Episcopal Church where a rather elegantly robed minister, who was attired also in flip flops, which I thought rather interesting, gave a sermon about being born again, which began with this story. The minister had been playing golf and he was approached on the golf course by a young man wearing a t-shirt that identified him as a member of a radical evangelical religious sect, had long hair and tatoos and seemed emotionally fervent. He asked the minister if he had been born again. And the minister replied, "Yes, every day."

Now that was the beginning of the sermon and a wonderful answer, I thought, from the golf playing minister. He meant that he wasn't just the same old guy every day, that he had fresh ideas, could approach the world with a new gaze, was not burdened by those who came before him. And I believed him, yet I realize that this being born again mission is not a lighthearted mission.

All of our readings today are about renewal, rebirth, and the notion of casting aside old ways of doing things, perhaps of sin, so as to take up a new life, a life of the spirit. The three different readings talk of different aspects of this.

Isaiah describes himself as being in the throne room of the celestial court and he is fearful in the presence of God since he has not lived a pure life. Suddenly a seraph comes and puts a burning coal to Isaiah's lips, a cautionary moment one would think, and that problem is taken care of, for he is purified. A seraph is a fiery serpent with six pairs of wings, just in case you happen to run across one. Isaiah is changed, made different, renewed, and it is a very serious matter. And, it didn't come free. In exchange for being purified, Isaiah is tasked with becoming God's emissary in the complicated politics of contemporary Judah, a mission that would ultimately fail, but that would last until the devastation of Judah was complete.

Then, in the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul is telling the Romans that they are debtors, obliged, once they have been given a vision and freed from sin by Jesus, obliged to pursue a life in the spirit. They owe, and, by extension, we owe too. That is, once born again, we owe it to stay reborn, or, if fallen off the birthing tray, to climb back up there as fast as we can, into the life we have once

discovered. So it's not so easy as the Spring that keeps coming back, or the new idea that keeps popping up. It's a way of life that you have to keep working for. Now when we get to John, there is an interesting dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus in which Nicodemus seems to be throwing out the glove a little bit and saying, well, how does this rebirth thing really work anyway. And, sort of in the way of TV comedians, Jesus and he sort of haggle is out. Jesus tells him in various ways that in order to receive the redemption of God, he must be "born of the spirit", that is, born again. And Nicodemus pursues this in a kind of schoolyard, niggling way, "how can this be... can I come out of my mother's womb again?" And Jesus purports not to believe that Nicodemus, a "teacher of Israel" or a Pharisee, does not understand these "matters of the spirit." It seems as though they each understand the other's perspective, but refuse to acknowledge it. Eventually Jesus tells him that those who love sin or evil and cling to it are condemned to live in it forever. In other words, he is saying, you have an opportunity, but it is up to you to grab it.

All of this is hard. It's not like waiting around for Spring to come at all. It's more like getting a new business going and trying to make sure it doesn't go underwater. Much of the concern is with debt and redemption. There is a wonderfully interesting book by Margaret Atwood called *Payback: (Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth)*. From this book I learned that in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, the same word is used for both debt and sin, so that when we say, for example, in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts", it is the same as saying trespasses or sins... and then, of course, we go on to say, "as we forgive those who sin against us." The whole Biblical, not to say only Christian, assessment of the human condition is based on the concept of debt and redemption. God promised to take care of the people of Israel in return for their continuing obedience to his laws. It's a contract,

a relationship of debt and obligation. The Hebrew Bible is a continuing lament for having neglected or fallen short on these obligations. Sometimes surrogates are provided in an attempt to expiate those obligations... fatted calves won't do, of course, but what about one's only son, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac?

But then Jesus offers the biggest redemption of all. Yes, all of humankind will be released from all of the burden of sin or debt, and not only each person's own personal sin or debt, but that inherited from past generations, going all the way back to the beginning of all humanity for all time, or original sin. Jesus by his sacrifice wipes away all that debt and sin from the beginning of humankind. If we people will only agree to be born into a new life, a life that rejects sin, then we will be washed free of all that sin and debt.

But with that comes responsibility to ensure that we will stay free from sin, and not only, it seems, our own personal sin, but that of humankind. But, we have to work hard to maintain that situation, and it is a cooperative effort. The lyrics from the spiritual, *Gather By The River*, lay it out:

*We shall gather at the river
 With each other cause you're my brother.
 Dip our souls in the water
 For the healing of each other.
 Be saved, sanctified,
 Freed from sin, to the very last.*

The spiritual shows how we must work together to keep ourselves free from sin and thus together in a debt free condition to make good our obligation to Jesus who

gave himself to humanity so that we could be free. Paul says that Jesus' gift means that we are heirs to the promises given to Abraham, adopted by the Spirit, even if we are not literally descended from him. Now we are debtors, says Paul, not to the flesh, but rather to the Spirit. So is that what it is to be born again? Still in debt, just to another creditor?

Look at the story of Nicodemus in John. In the segment that we read this morning, we see Nicodemus being challenging of Jesus, maybe a little bit on the other side of things. Jesus tells him that he is not being a very good teacher to ignore matters of the spirit and dwell on upon the logic of earthly transactions, and there they leave it for the moment. But we meet Nicodemus twice again in the book of John, and at each meeting he has become more thoughtful, perhaps more imbued with the Spirit that Jesus has been teaching. The next time he is telling those who want to put Jesus in jail that they cannot do that without giving Jesus a hearing, and finally we find him, after the crucifixion, as one of the mourners, helping Joseph of Arimathea bathe Jesus' body and prepare it for burial. In the Catholic church, he is a saint. Clearly he went through a process with Jesus and perhaps was born again so that he could participate in the new life of the Spirit.

All the passages we read today, Isaiah, in Romans and in John talk of being born again to a new life of the spirit and that when that happens one's old sins and debts are cancelled. One has to accept the conditions - purity, a hot coal on the lips, for example, as in Isaiah, or a life without sin, a belief in Jesus, but then you are free. What seems not so much discussed, is the ongoing obligation that is required. It is not a one-time thing, this freedom from sin, this life in the Spirit, and one has to keep on working on it. People have spent their lives writing about their dances with the Spirit, now close, now far, now present, now absent.

For us, it seem that we willl have to keep on gathering at the river with our brothers. One time is not going to do it, though it may serve the purpose of making us understand the possibiltiy. We have to keep ourselves open to the possibilities of a new way of looking at life. Being born again is not a club with which we fend off the rest of the world... it's an opportunity to keep learning and expanding, serving and helping. For truly, as living beings, we are always accumulating new debts. The human condition is a series of debts and obligations and redemptions. Our job is to keep the balance sheet in order. Maybe we won't ever see a fiery seraph, but we can certainly dip our souls in the water for the healing of each other, and we can do it over and over.

Spring, the plants coming up, the same, or a little bit different?

Florida minister to t-shirt guy - reborn everyday. But, are we doing it the same old way. That's the point of the story.

Rewrite debt sermon