

Have *You* Been Born Again?

St. John 3:1-17

Today we have the opportunity to understand our baptism a little better. Most of us, I suppose, were baptized long ago – and most of us as infants so that we have no memory of it. We may remember only the stories we were told about it by parents or sponsors. It's easy to forget your baptism, but it's not smart to forget it. Let's try to recover and reclaim it today.

Jesus says when he is talking to Nicodemus, You can't see the kingdom of God unless you are born again. Seeing the kingdom of God doesn't mean going to heaven when you die. It means seeing God at work even before you die in the world and in your life, aligning yourself with that work, and committing yourself to join it. Jesus says you have to be born again to be able to do that. Nicodemus is probably trying to be funny when he wonders how he can crawl back into his mother's womb so that he can be born again. That's when Jesus talks to him about being born of water and the Spirit.

"Born again" has become a kind of slogan in recent years. Once on Celebrity Apprentice one of the participants asked another whether he was a born-again Christian? (He told him he was a Catholic!) If someone were to ask us that question, I wonder how we would answer. Usually it's someone who has had an intense religious experience and wants you to have it, too, wants you to join, as they like to say, in committing yourself to Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. And since baptism is a sign of being born again, that person may want you to be baptized again, too, if you were baptized first as an infant, because apparently, or perhaps, the first baptism didn't take.

How can we respond lovingly and Christianly to those who question our faith and our baptism in this way? These people are not our enemies, they are in fact our brothers and sisters in Christ even if they have a different understanding of baptism than we do. We are one with them in wanting to honor Christ and read the Bible. But they may make us feel second-rate spiritually, as if our faith is incomplete without this born-again experience and a second baptism. And it's true, isn't it, that some of us who were baptized long ago are working with a pretty cold faith that can use some warming up?

As we understand it, baptism is God's way of taking us in, taking us into Christ's death and resurrection and into Christ's body the Church. God gives us a fresh start, a new birth, by virtue of his grace and this sacrament. You don't have to reach a certain age or maturity before God can do this to you. So if you are baptized as an infant, then the hope and expectation is that you will grow up spiritually even as you grow up physically. That's the important role that parents and sponsors play in baptism. Just as you grow up to understand the world and the family into which you have been born, so you grow up to understand the promise of God and the family of God into which you have been baptized. The good thing about infant baptism is that it doesn't tempt us to think we have

to qualify for it by age or maturity or by having some intense religious experience.

The grace and the blessing of God is something we can only receive, never earn or deserve.

What is compelling, I think, about born-again people is their seeming total dedication and fervency, and the reason that seems compelling is because so many of us neglect our baptism. We treat it like something that happened long ago, and so we don't think much about it. It's a certificate in the same file as our birth certificate, in case anybody asks about our birth or our baptism. But our actual baptism (whether as an infant or later) is meant to be like being crowned Miss America or Miss Mexico or whatever. After being crowned, you wake up every day and quickly remember who you are: you are Miss America. Martin Luther wants us to wake up every day and remember: I am baptized, I am child of God...and to do that by making the sign of your baptism, the sign of the cross, perhaps saying the Apostles Creed (I believe in God – Father, Son, and Spirit), saying the Our Father, and then another little morning prayer he gave us:

I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have kept me this night from all harm and danger. And I pray that you would keep me this day also from sin and every evil that all my doings and life may please you. For into your hands I commend myself, my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me that the wicked foe may have no power over me.

And then, as he says, we may go to our work singing. So our baptism can work in our lives every day to give us clarity and courage to be the people God wants us to be, the people we in our better moments want to be.

Our baptism is not long ago and far away but it's here and it's now, yesterday and today and tomorrow. It's a key element of our identity:

God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son so that everyone who believes in God may not perish but have everlasting life.

That means me/you...now. We are the ones God wants not to perish. God doesn't want us to live in despair or hopelessness or just plain futility. God wants us to live with large doses of joy, of hope, of cheer, of generosity, of humility, and of discipline. So we don't just bask in our baptism like a sun-bather, but we live in it and we live out of it like a daily fitness regimen.

And if you are newly ready to do that today, you don't need to be baptized again. You just need to return to your baptism, to recover it, to reclaim it. And one way to do that is by holy communion. Holy communion is a lot like baptism: it is God's embrace of us again and again and again. It is the gift of God's Spirit, God's energy, God's challenge to love others as he loves us. In baptism God births us anew. In holy communion God feeds and nourishes that new life with his word and Spirit. We call baptism and holy communion the two sacraments

because they both are God's unique gifts to us: the first one makes us his, and the second one keeps us his and treats us as his.

The problem with so much born-again talk these days is that it often amounts to a one-time splurge of emotion, and emotions come and go (they can be like a roller-coaster), but God's love and promise come to stay. We don't put stock in our emotions but in God's love and God's word. That is, we don't put trust in our emotions but in God's word and promise. The important thing is not how we may feel, even how we may feel about God, but how God feels about us. Baptism is the permanent sign of God's love for you, and forever after you get to live in that love - on good days when it's easy to see it and celebrate it and on bad days when you have to cling to it for dear life. Being born again is not adding Jesus to your life like another ingredient in the recipe but having Jesus transform your life from top to bottom like yeast in the dough. It's waking up to a new world where the things of God's Spirit become intensely real, where you learn to love what God love and to be passionate about what God is passionate about.

A woman once asked Martin Marty (grand old churchman from Chicago) if he was born again. He said Yes. Her eyes lit up: when did it happen, she asked. He gave her the date of his baptism, many years before. She recognized he could scarcely have been born by then, much less born again in the way she meant it. Marty explained that he was born again when he was baptized, and then he went on to say he's been born again and again and again, day after day after day. It's not a one-time thing, it's a daily thing. The Christian rises every day not to the same old miserable life but to the new life and the steady grace and the exciting challenge of being agent of God and friend of Jesus and child of God in a sometimes wonderful but often miserable, needy world.

So like Martin Marty, we celebrate our baptism today even as we celebrate the holy communion. We remember our baptism. We reclaim it. We rejoice to be born again. And we smile to think that every day when we rise we are born again and again and again, by God's good grace, to the new kind of life we see so beautifully embodied in Jesus, the Spirited life, full of love and joy and peace and patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and discipline. God bless you in your being born again and again day after day into the beautiful new life of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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5 March 2023 – Lent 2
Nativity Lutheran Church
Weeki Wachee, FL