

Seeds of the Spirit

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This past week I read a shocking yet somewhat unsurprising article about a senior pastor in New Zealand who leads a popular multi-campus set of churches called Destiny Church. This pastor preached to his congregation that Bible-believing, born-again Christians who pay their tithes are protected from the coronavirus. He based this on Psalm 91 because the Psalm “assures us of God’s protection.” Now, while Psalm 91 does speak of God’s protection and deliverance, I’m not so sure that Psalm was written as a means to inform the Bible-believing, tithe-paying born again Christians of 2020 that they need not fear the coronavirus. This is, in fact, a very dangerous form of theology and a dangerous way of leading and misleading Christians, which we won’t delve into the details of today. The reason I tell this story is because of a couple words that are used: born again. Why would that pastor specifically say that those who are “born again” are protected by God? What is it about being “born again” that makes you any different from a person who does not claim to be “born again”? What does “born again” really mean?

I don’t know about you, but having grown up in a Presbyterian church, I never really knew much about those words, born again. They weren’t words we tended to use in church or in Sunday school or in Bible studies. I may have seen those words used in films or books, but in general, being “born again” was not something I was actually familiar with. In fact, I have a minister friend who once joked that whenever he’s come

across people who have asked him when we was born again, his response is simply, “Oh, I’m Presbyterian.”

I imagine for some of us, the idea of being “born again” is something we associate with pastors like this one in New Zealand—folks who try to cultivate the lives of those who have made the decision to change their lives around and accept Jesus as their Saviour, but who often cultivate those lives with misinformation, with a focus on giving money to the church, and twisting the words of the Bible to form their own, often self-centred, interpretations. In other words, the ideas and concepts being planted take root and grow in ways that undermine God’s great story. If that’s what the outcome of being born again means, understandably many of us are not interested.

I checked to see how those in the world of the internet describe the term “born again Christians.” Some lump the term together with extreme political conservatism. Some describe “born agains” as folks who found God or Christianity later in life. Others more earnestly describe it as people who have accepted Jesus as their Saviour or Redeemer. So what *does* it mean to be “born again”? Instead of leaning on the internet, what does the Bible have to say about it?

In our scripture from John today, we heard the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus says to Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (John 3:3). And this confuses Nicodemus—how can a person be born twice? If you’re already an adult, how can you possibly be born again? How can you become an

infant once more? It just doesn't make sense. So Jesus makes a second attempt to explain it. This time he tells Nicodemus that before you can get into God's kingdom you must be born of water and spirit; that only God's spirit can change you into a child of God, only God's spirit can bring new life. But Nicodemus still doesn't understand.

I imagine a lot of us are a bit like Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a leader within his community. He was a very rational and logical person—he wanted to get answers and so he set up a time to meet with Jesus face to face. However, he was also entrenched in the Jewish religious system and laws—a system that he feared stepping out of line with, so he met with Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness. We are entrenched in the culture and systems of our own time, too. Faith, in particular, is not typically seen as something we are to discuss and share at work or with certain social groups or with our neighbour who may be of a different religion. Instead we compartmentalize faith for particular times and places. Like Nicodemus, we don't want to stir the pot too fiercely, so faith becomes something for the private sphere, not for public issues.

All in all, having faith that thrives in the darkness is not something to be ashamed of. There is still something praiseworthy there; it is genuine, heartfelt, personal, and often deep. The point isn't that this hidden faith is somehow faulty, rather, it is too small. Seeds may be planted, but growth is slow and stifled when it's only cultivated in darkness. I like the way the commentator Deborah Kapp puts it; she says, "In this text Jesus suggests that Nicodemus's kind of faith is incomplete, even immature. He likens his midnight encounter with Nicodemus to a child still safe in its mother's womb. You are

still gestating, Jesus implies. You must be born again, and declare this faith in the light of day.”

In our church, you might think of being born again as being similar to baptism. After all, Jesus said you must be born again by water and Spirit, and baptism very clearly involves both water and the Holy Spirit. But if you are baptized as an infant, is that moment of water and spirit really what Jesus meant as being born again when you were quite literally birthed mere months before? Or is that perhaps what confirmation is for? When infants or children are baptized there are adults who make commitments of faith on their behalf. Confirmation is a time of study and thought and reflection for when those young children grow older and are better able to absorb and understand who Christ is and why his ministry, death and resurrection are key to living out our faith as people who seek peace, justice, kindness, and love. Because they are older they can freely stand before their church community and proclaim their desire to be a follower of Christ, to renounce what is wrong, to reconcile and forgive, to embrace and show God’s love and light at all times and places. So, is that the moment in which one is born again?

The answer is yes/and. Yes, we are born again when baptized with water and spirit and made children of God, members of God’s worldwide family. Yes, we are born again when we are baptized as adults or go through confirmation classes and we choose to commit ourselves as followers of Jesus, to publicly express our believe in a God who is giving and loving to the point of death on the cross, but who is also eternal and who

rises again to new life, rises to proclaim that love conquers evil. Yes, you could not yet be baptized and still feel called by God, drawn toward a desire for reconciliation, forgiveness, peace, justice, love. Because when we are able to see and experience *that* kind of love, and know within ourselves that we are leading lives that proclaim that *love* is the only way forward, THEN we have come to the kingdom of God. We are indeed born from above.

Experiencing this amazing kingdom of God way of being—what if we think of it as more than a command from Jesus? What if behind Jesus' words of "if you want to experience the Kingdom of God you MUST be born from above?" was something we could interpret as so much more than a command? What if we think of it as an *invitation from God* to allow God to work more fully in our lives? When Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born again by water and Spirit, he is asking Nicodemus to let God work in his life.

Something we have to realize when we accept this invitation from God is that being born again is not a one time event. Consider a major event that occurred in your own life: graduating from school, winning a big competition, purchasing a house, overcoming an illness, entering into retirement, welcoming your own child into the world—no matter the event, it didn't simply and suddenly *happen*. That event was part of a whole process. So while, yes, Jesus is clear about the need for spirit-birth, in today's culture we have taken that profound truth and twisted it, perhaps even cheapened it, by focusing only on the birth event and not on the process of being born again. We have reduced that amazing moment that was the culmination of so many other moments and

turned it into a question that deflects from the whole process. If we ask, “do you believe in Jesus?” And the answer is simply “yes,” and nothing more is discussed or shared or enacted, we miss the point. By inviting God into our lives we are inviting a process, a process that will include all kinds of hills and valleys, variable amounts of time, certainty and uncertainty, confusion and understanding. It’s the same for anything we work for with intentionality.

What if we recast “you must be born again” into “you must allow the seeds of the Spirit to enter your soul, sprout there, grow there, until finally they come forth in an amazing and God-filled way, and your very nature and your relationship to everything and everyone around you is changed forever”? I mean, it’s a lot more of a mouthful to say, but it makes the process of being born again feel invigorating, doesn’t it?

When those seeds of the Spirit are planted within you, when you give God access to your heart, your mind, and your soul, it affects not just you personally, but those around you, too. The ways you interact with other people, with God’s creation, with the culture and systems that you are rooted into, they change. Consider how it affects your relationship to others if you know that the way you deal with them might be part of a “born again” process, part of that invitation you accepted to let God work within you? And how might it affect our relationship with others knowing they, too, may be experiencing processes of being born again?

It took Nicodemus time to go from the cover of darkness to the brightness of light, but it happened as he experienced a born again process of growth with God. We can observe throughout the book of John how his seedling faith sprouted and grew and bloomed. First by coming to Jesus in the cover of night. Then, later, he kind of half defends Jesus to the other Pharisees; it's not a full defence, but he suggests to the other Pharisees that arresting Jesus is not totally fair since "their law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing" (John 7:51). It's weak, but it's said in the brightness of day. Finally, we see God's cultivation within Nicodemus really blossom when, after Jesus' death, he joins Joseph of Arimathea with a hundred pounds of myrrhs and aloes, and the two men "[take] the body of Jesus and [wrap] it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews" (John 19:40). Now *that's* a transformation.

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. Lent is a season with themes of sacrifice and self emptying. It points toward the cross and reminds us of the suffering and death of Jesus. But these seemingly fearful realities serve a life-giving purpose: we can't have new life without death; we can't have transformation without change. Being born culminates one process of germination and growth and transformation, and begins another. With the reminder of new life and new beginnings, may this season of Lent also be for us a time of accepting God's invitation to plant seeds of the spirit in us; to cultivate, to germinate, to gestate, and eventually to bring forth new life and faith from within ourselves. And then, may the process begin again and again in ever new ways. Amen.