

Baptism: New Birth and New Creation
John 3:1-8; II Corinthians 5:17-20

Baptism is a living symbol of the Christian life. Two of its most important meanings are the New Birth and the New Creation. The first speaks of the transformation of the person, the other speaks to the transformation of the world.

I

Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus in John focuses on personal transformation. The key phrase is "born again". So, let's ponder the mystery of new birth.

Nicodemus is already on the way to the new birth as he comes to Jesus. He has recognized that Jesus is a teacher sent from God, for no one, he says, "can do these signs...apart from the presence of God."

He, however, may not been prepared for the force of Jesus' response:

Truly, truly, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again
(or born anew.)

Nicodemus answered in effect, "Isn't it a little late for that?" What he said was, "How can one re-enter the mother's womb and be born again?"

Jesus restated it, this time more deeply:

Truly, truly, one cannot enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit, for that which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of Spirit is Spirit.

So we are drawing closer to the heart of the matter. Everyone is born of the flesh in the waters of the mother's womb, but we need something more: to be born of the Spirit, a new birth, a second birth, born from above.

Jesus is talking about transformation. As one has said, we need most not to be *bettered*, but to be transformed.

Then Jesus likened the new birth to the movement of the wind. In the Greek the word is *pneuma*, and it means wind, spirit and breath, all three. The wind comes in. We don't see where it came from or where it goes, but we see, feel its effects. Some have sought to narrow down the meaning of the new birth to one kind of experience, but who can bottle the wind, lasso the Holy Spirit?

For some the new birth blows in like a hurricane, re-arranging everything. For others it comes like a sweet summer breeze fragrant with flowers. For some it comes in an instant; for others it comes gradually as the slow coming of the dawn, or like a flower turning its face almost imperceptibly toward the sun.

In the children's classic *The Velveteen Rabbit*, two toys in the boy's playroom, the old wise Skin Horse and the new Velveteen Rabbit, are talking

about what it means to be REAL. The Velveteen Rabbit asks: “Does it happen all at once, like being wound up?...or bit by bit?”¹ I think the answer to that question is *both*. To some one way, to others the other way.

For most of us it is a process of becoming. As one theologian put it, it takes a lifetime of conversions to become the new creation God made us to be. A being born over and over.

In his novel, *Love in Time of Cholera*, Gabriel Marcia Marquez writes:

He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human being are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.

Such is the work of the Spirit, the mystery of new birth.

For Paul and his conversion on the road to Damascus it was a complete life-altering experience. Time was divided into B.D., before Damascus, and A.D., after Damascus. The Southern novelist Flannery O’Conner said of his conversion, “I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse.”²

But here’s another kind of conversion. Dag Hammarskjold was the Secretary General of the United Nations in the 1960’s, a great world leader. He died tragically in an airplane crash on a mission to Africa. Few knew, however, of

his profound spirituality until after his death when his personal journal, *Markings*, was published. Here is his entry for Pentecost Sunday, 1961:

I don't know Who—or what—put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *Yes* to someone—or something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender had a goal.³

Jesus calls us everyday to open the windows and doors of our lives to the winds of the Spirit, that we may receive a newness of life, a daily “borning”.

However, this transformation is not only personal, it is also the transformation of the world. Jesus called this transformation “the Kingdom of God.” It was not just something that enters *us*, it was something we enter. Christians often talk about *Christ-in-us*, but the new birth is also about *entering into* Christ, that is, into Christ's realm of transformation that is larger than we can ever imagine. And what happens when we enter the kingdom of God, enter into Christ is *change*.

When Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of God”, he really meant *change*! Change we are not

always ready for. New birth means change, all kinds of change. Which now moves us into Paul's vision of the new Creation.

II

The "New Creation" was Paul's way of talking about "The Kingdom of God" as he sought to translate the gospel for the Hellenistic mind. Our text today in II Corinthians is a hymn to the New Creation. You can almost sing it!

Therefore if anyone is in Christ
 they are a new creature,
 old things have passed away,
 behold, all things are become new!

As I was growing up the words were always "new creature", with an emphasis on personal transformation. But Paul's vision here is much bigger than personal transformation; it is about being part of God's transformation of the world. So the better and more literal translation of this verse is:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ
there is a new creation!

It is more than becoming new creatures; we are becoming part of the New Creation. All the walls of divisions, distrust and fear are coming down. The old creation is passing away, the New Creation is on the way!

Paul Tillich wrote these luminous words about the New Creation and our part in it:

We only want to show you something we have seen and to tell you something we have heard: That in the midst of the old creation there is a New Creation, and that this New Creation is manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ....We want only to communicate to you an experience we have had that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation.⁴

This feels so true to me—about my life and about the world in which I live: “That in the midst of the old creation there is a New Creation”, that “*here* and *there* in the world and *now* and *then* in ourselves *there* is a New Creation”. Does this feel true to you?

If we said the New Creation was fully here, we’d be fooling ourselves. It is here but not fully here. But that it is *here*, here and there in the world and *now* and *then* in ourselves is surely good news to a world trapped in the old creation. Carlyle Marney said, “The new creation has to happen where the old creation resides.” But is happening! And as it does, transformation happens.

Sometimes we see it in the world: the Berlin Wall crumbles; we work and work for social change, for civil rights and equal rights, and after bloodying our knuckles on the doors of injustice, something happens, something new, something good.

Sometimes we see the changes in ourselves. Old animosities soften, old prejudices fall away, closed hearts are opened and our hearts grow warm. We now see the world in a whole new way. And it is all by grace, all the gift of God.

III

At the heart of what Paul calls the New Creation is the next stanza of Paul's hymn:

All this is from God

who reconciled us to God's own self, through Christ,

and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation.

He sings on:

That is,...in Christ God was reconciling the world to God's own self,

not counting their trespasses against them

and entrusting to us (yes us!) the message of reconciliation.

"So", he concludes, wrapping up the hymn:

...We are ambassadors for Christ,
God making the appeal through us.

We implore you:

Be reconciled to God!

Reconciliation! That's it, the theme of the New Creation. It first happens in us, then we become agents of God's reconciliation in the world. *We are, are* reconciled. And as Buechner described *grace*:

There's nothing *you* have to do. There's nothing you *have* to do. There's nothing you have to *do*.⁵

There are these divisions in our minds and in the world, but now they are coming down. This is the healing of our hearts and minds, the baptism of our hearts and minds. And this is the healing of the world.

In 1999 I was a movie called *The Straight Story*, based on a true story about a man named Alvin Straight who rode his riding lawn mower 240 miles across Iowa to Wisconsin to visit his ailing brother.

The brothers were estranged and hadn't spoken in years. One day Alvin heard of his brother's illness. They were both getting up in years, and he decided he needed to do what he could to restore the relationship. He was old, didn't have

a driver's license or car, so he took off across Iowa on his riding lawn mower day after day, through all kinds of weather to see his brother.

Finally he arrived at this brother's house, walked up to the front porch and yelled out his brother's name through the screened door. His brother inside the house yelled back in a yelp of joy, "Is that you!?" There the movie ends, with that cry of joy. Reconciliation.

Paul says that it is something like this that Christ has done for us. And when we hear his voice, we come running. And now we get to join God's holy work of reconciliation.

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1. Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Running Press, 1981),p.14
 2. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, (N.Y.: vintage, 1979),p.354-5.
 3. Dag Hammarskjold, *Markings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,1966),p.201.
 4. Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's sons, 1955),p.18.
 5. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1973),p.34.

