



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Born Again, Anew, Above

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 12, 2017*

*The Second Sunday in Lent—Based on John 3: 1-17*

I wish I could claim that day with my own memory. I wish I knew what I was feeling as I moved from inside to outside. Was I stifled and eager to get outta there? Did my little lungs long to breathe the air and hear my mother's voice unmuffled, clear as day? Or was I warm and comfortable and didn't particularly want to leave, thank you very much? Were my first screams in that photograph ones of pain, fear, frustration? Or was I just a little chilly?

My birth was out of my control. And it remains beyond my comprehension. Like Jesus said: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born. . ." But he doesn't stop there. He specifies, saying, "So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

"Born of the Spirit?" What is this? He says this to Nicodemus, a certain Jewish elite of Jerusalem, who is on the fence about Jesus, and meets with him under the secret cloak of the night. He is bewildered by what Jesus says. "How can this be?" He's confused by Jesus, as well we might be. For Jesus had just offered this enigmatic saying that if anyone is to see God come in God's fullness, they must be born from above, born anew, born again.

And Nicodemus, who is the literal-minded religious type, scoffs. "Who can be born a second time!?! No one can enter again into the mother's womb after growing old! You speak in foolish nonsense, Rabbi, like those silly parables of yours!"

But Jesus has already tried to clarify the images for him. Jesus has said that there is a birth of the flesh, or another way of putting it, a birth through water. Everyone has that.

And yet, there is this next birth. A birth through the Spirit. A birth ushered in by the contractions of a heavenly Mother, rather than an earthly one. On the other side of that, we see anew. We hear anew.

Jesus didn't get this out of thin air. Nicodemus should know. It's in the Torah! When the Hebrews chase after false idols, they are rebuked in this way: "You were unmindful of the Rock (of your salvation) that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." (Deuteronomy 32:18)

From the beginning, the Hebrews had been born by God. They also had a second birth, in a way. They were not born out of the waters of the womb, but they were borne through the water of the Red Sea to the dry land of Promise. They were born again by being liberated from slavery, one of the oldest lies around.

Instead of seeing slavery as a curse given by God, they could now see the Spirit moving afresh, a Spirit that proclaimed slavery as not a fact of life, but a lack of life, a perversion of the truth of what we were made to be. This is one of the greatest epiphanies in our heritage, one that we keep needing to rediscover. For there are so many ways we have devised to trap one another in cords of bondage, both visible and invisible, and then say it was meant to be. Alas, after this rebirth, we can't say that anymore.

So being born of God was as old as the oldest Holy Scripture. But Nicodemus, expert on the Scriptures, didn't really know what mattered most. "You're a teacher," Jesus says to him, "but you don't understand these things? What it means to be born of the Spirit, to move out of the dark of one's old life, and into the light of the new one?"

Jesus is trying to prepare Nicodemus to see that light, to prepare his heart to see his neighbor in a new way. To see God in a new way. For Nicodemus was the epitome of spiritual complacency. He was truly sincere in his faith, yet he thought he had it all figured out; he was an official know-it-all. But his self-assured knowing threatened to block him from being able to perceive God's presence right in front of his face.

But how can God do a new thing with us, when the old stuff feels so good? It has to be something deep and resounding. For we know now that all the facts and citations in the world cannot guarantee that a person will change their worldview. We actually experience genuine pleasure, a little rush of dopamine, when we process information that supports our beliefs. It feels good to 'stick to our guns' even if we are wrong. This is how some of the most stubborn and vile ideas persist in our so-called enlightened age. And so you see part of Jesus' frustration: "If I have told you the truth about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you the truth about heavenly things?"

Jesus aims to open Nicodemus' eyes, despite himself, and our eyes, despite ourselves, to a world of new birth. And one of the newest things about it is that it is not via the threat of hell-fire. It is not through a heavenly, thundering "or-else," for anyone! As Jesus said to his new friend, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Jesus is not interested in placing obstacles in our way, or setting traps. He wants to open up a path that had always been there for Nicodemus, a wide field of God's design whose bounds reach far beyond what he had closed himself off to. A realm beyond tribe and nation and so-called race or class or gender. This is a realm beyond the endlessly proliferating rules we use to define who is in and who is out, who is good or bad. And it's a realm that lies beyond the control of those who would use the threat of loss or death to make us dance to their tune. Instead it is the free land that is found by finding the next life in this life, come what may. As of old, the waters of being born in the Spirit lead us out of all manner of slaveries, into the freedom of all manner of promised lands.

This is a birth we can share in, with God. This is a birth we will actually remember, because we have our share in it, where our spirit and the Spirit of God come together, and move together in the real world of mercy and love.

Nicodemus had his second birth, I believe. It was he who joined Joseph of Arimathea, another elite of Jerusalem, to help in giving Jesus a proper burial. Michelangelo made a sculpture of this scene. And it is said that Michelangelo carved his own face upon his Nicodemus. He's no longer with Jesus in the secret dark, but in his teacher's death he outs himself as a friend, as a disciple. He's not afraid anymore. In the light of all, his light shines in that dark time. A new commitment and resolve begin for him, to honor what God has done for him, and to make his own life an act of thanks, even at the grave, and to set his sights on what is next under God.

As Hamlet said to his friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy." If we learn anything from this enigmatic dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, it's that no matter how far we've come, we aren't done yet. A challenge comes to all of us, a challenge to emerge from out of our complacency in the (missing word/s). A call to scour our hearts for all those things done and left undone. And then a time to wonder at those eternal things prepared for us. In them we have barely begun. In many ways, we've yet to be born.

Could this solemn Lent be our time of gestation? And is Easter our time to be born again? I hope so.