

Real Faith for Real People:
“Could We Start Again, Please?”

John 3:1-8, 16-17

Dr. J. Howard Olds

August 26, 2007

It's been said of Jesus that whenever he met a person it was as if that person were an island around which Jesus sailed until he found the real problem. And there he landed.

He did that with the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus and landed on the question of integrity. *“All that I have stolen, I will repay four-fold.”* He did that with the woman at the well and landed on the subject of marriage. *“Go call your husband.”* And here in John 3, Jesus does that with the powerful, prestigious, political Nicodemus by saying, *“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. Do not be surprised at my saying ‘You must be born again.’”* And that's where I want to land today. I want to talk about new birth, spiritual birth, being born from above, being born again. Yes, you can begin again.

NEW BIRTH IS A GIFT TO BE RECEIVED

In a *Dennis the Menace* cartoon, Dennis is being dragged off to his room for misbehaving. As he goes he screams, “I never asked to be born.” Of course, Dennis is technically right. None of us asked to be born. Birth is something that happens to us.

The same is true with our spiritual birth. For years I read those words of Jesus stating *“You must be born again”* as a command that I had to obey, an experience I needed to manipulate. None of that is true. I can no more engineer my spiritual birth than I actualized my physical birth. Birth is something that happens to us. It is a gift.

Our founder, John Wesley said there are two great spiritual truths that we need to understand as Christians. The first is Justification—the great work God does for us in pardoning our sins. And the other is New Birth—the great change God works in the soul when he brings it to life. Spiritual birth is a gift.

What does spiritual birth do for us? It Gives Us Breath. Life can knock the breath out of us. In addition to all my other problems, I managed to fall the other day at home. And there is a lot of me when I fall. My mother-in-law was on the phone and I was trying to find Sandy and I was chasing through the house and low and behold, my feet flew out from under me and I went sliding all the way across our family room. Caught in the shock of that moment, my prayer was two-fold, “Please, God, don’t let my mother-in-law hear what I just said.” And the petition was “Let me get my breath.” The fall had knocked the wind out of me. I couldn’t breathe.

Spiritually speaking, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Pay attention to the wind, Nicodemus. The answer is blowing in the wind.” Wind and spirit in the Bible are the same word. You have got to pay attention to the Spirit, Nicodemus. Life has knocked the wind out of you—too many late night meetings, too many hard decisions, too many worries, too many doubts—you are out of breath. Let the Holy Spirit breathe into you the breath of life.

Spiritual birth gives us eyes that are open to new insight, ears that are open to new voices, hearts that are open to God’s people. Some people define religion as a way of seeing, a set of glasses through which we view the world. Just as physical birth stimulates a child’s senses, so spiritual birth opens our eyes to new insights, it opens our ears to spiritual voices, and opens our hearts to all God’s people.

“You must be born again,” says Jesus. Smart, wise, intelligent, Nicodemus just didn’t get it. As stupid as it may seem, he’s trying to figure out how a grown man can return to his mother’s womb. So, spiritual birth is not a matter of education, experience, or even enlightenment. In fact, I encounter smart people all the time

who just don't get this religion thing. That's why you are bored in church, turned off by people of faith, skeptical of any revelation. Yet, like Nicodemus, you long for something more, more faith, more love, more hope. There is that deep, deep longing—could I start again, please? Could I start again? Open our eyes, Lord. We need to see Jesus.

Spiritual Birth Opens Up a Whole New World.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Do you believe that?

A competitive toddler was hugging her daddy and at the same time sticking out her tongue toward her twin brother. But you know how parents are; they have eyes in the back of their heads. When the dad caught on, he called a halt to the whole thing. The truth remains, “We cannot hug our heavenly Father and stick out our tongues at our brothers and sisters, whoever our brothers and sisters might be.

God so loved the world. Not part of the world, but all of the world. God did not love the world just some of the time, but all of the time. God so loved the world for the good of the world not the destruction of the world.

You can't believe John 3:16 and be a pessimist. Hate is incongruent with the will of God. The world is not coming to death, it is coming to life. It's not the fear of being left behind, it's “Look who's coming to our world!” Jesus Christ himself came to save us. He wants the very best for all of us. You've got to have spiritual eyes to see that. God is trying to introduce us to a whole new world view and we are stuck in an old world view. Why are we more interested in condemnation than regeneration? Spiritual birth is a gift to be received.

SPIRITUAL BIRTH IS A LIFE TO BE LIVED. We call it Transformation.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come” (II Corinthians 5:17).

Touching Hearts and Transforming Lives is more than a trendy slogan for BUMC. Transformation means change from the inside out, conversion from the old to the new, a metamorphosis of caterpillars to butterflies. Transformation is our path to true freedom, our hope of becoming fully human. New birth means new life.

New birth means new life in Christ. John the Baptist, responding to an argument between his disciples and the disciples of Jesus, says “*Christ must increase; I must decrease. The One who comes from above is above all...*” (John 3:30-31). Paul says in Galatians 2:20, “*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*” Jesus prayed to his Father saying, “*I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to complete unity so the world will know you sent me*” (John 17:23).

Let me say it again, life is not about you, about your pleasure, your satisfaction, your happiness, your accomplishments. Life is not about me, my church, my health, my ministry, my years. Life is about Christ in you and me, our hope of glory. It is about the riches of God’s mysteries, the half of which no human mind can explain. May God save us from our self-centered, egotistical, hard-headed, do-it-yourself religion. May God transform us into the image of Christ.

New birth means new life in community.

I know there are times when you would rather do it yourself, but you are not wired that way. We are made to belong, to be a part of the family of God, to become the body of Christ.

Certainly the Church is not perfect. How could it be? It’s made up of people like you and me. The Church is God’s best hope for humanity. Friday night on 20/20, John Stossel explored the habits of generous and not so generous people in America. After he interviewed the Ted Turners of the world, and explored the major charities of our country, he turned to the Church—a single Lutheran

congregation up North who devoted themselves to supporting an orphanage in Africa. In that little church ordinary people testified about the change God brought into their lives by giving a child a place to live.

Wesley believed there was no such thing as solitary religion. The longer I live, the more I tend to agree.

New Birth Means New Life in the Light of Eternity.

Transformation never happens instantly. We may be born anew in a moment, but we are transformed in the light of eternity. John Murphy in his book on spiritual transformation, talks about the way God transformed him from an obese, rebellious, drug addict into a caring, conscientious minister to persons suffering from substance abuse. In it he makes this comment, “While I did receive some instant relief from my dysfunctional and painful life, I hardly started striding with a sure-footed Christian walk. I’ve now been a Christian for 24 years, and God hasn’t finished the process yet.”

In God’s time, in God’s time, have we the patience to be transformed in God’s time? In God’s time we can become what we are created to be.

You can be born from Above. It is God’s gift to you. You can live a Christ-like life. You can have a Spiritual birth that introduces a whole new world that shapes your life into the image of Christ. You can start again. The time to begin is now.

Amen.