

## ***What Do We Believe?***

John 3:1-17

February 17, 2008

### **I.**

Our Gospel today is a well-known story in the New Testament. It is familiar because of two things Jesus said that frequently are quoted and sometimes are misunderstood.

The first is that Jesus said no one could enter the kingdom of God without being born from above. Some Bibles, notably the old King James version, translate that as "being born again." Both are correct. The original Greek in which John wrote his Gospel uses a word, having no English counterpart, that could mean either born again or born from above, or both.

The second thing Jesus said is probably the most frequently quoted citation of a chapter and verse in the entire Bible. It is John 3:16. Most of us have heard that reference in those exact words. We even see it on signs at sporting events and other public gatherings. It's the next to last verse in our reading today, and it says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

How do we understand these words? At times our readings from Scripture use contrasts to describe two sides of the same coin. Sometimes they are opposing things, such as worldly things and spiritual things, or living for ourselves or living in Christ.

Sometimes, however, they are not choices but points on a continuum. Examples are this world and the next world, the world we have and the world to come, or the here and now and the hereafter.

Today's Gospel works that way. It talks about our salvation in the next world, but it clearly tells us what has to happen in this world for that salvation to be a reality. They are forever linked by Jesus' words.

### **II.**

The reading begins with Jesus being questioned by Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Pharisees were the Jewish sect that often challenged Jesus and his ministry in the New Testament. Nicodemus, however, was no ordinary Pharisee. In other parts of John's Gospel he spoke about treating Jesus fairly (7:50-52), and helped bury Jesus' body after the crucifixion (19:39).

And he approached Jesus that night by recognizing that Jesus had come from God, which prompted Jesus to say that no one could see the kingdom of God without being born from above. This confused Nicodemus who was thinking in terms of physical birth, and he asked how a person's mother could give birth twice.

Jesus, however, was speaking of spiritual birth, and then he said in the next verse that we must be born of both water and the Spirit to enter God's kingdom. So here we see that being born from above, or being born again, means being born of water and Spirit.

Most people understand that being born of water refers to baptisms like our own, which are linked to the work of John the Baptist during Jesus' time. The meaning of birth in the Spirit, however, can generate different opinions.

The general Roman Catholic view is that spiritual birth occurs simultaneously with baptism. The Reformed theological view is that spiritual birth can come at any time, and that we are powerless to do anything about it. That doctrine claims that certain people have been selected by God for salvation before they are born, and those fortunate individuals will be irresistibly

drawn to life in the Holy Spirit through no actions or decisions of their own. Salvation, according to this view, is entirely a matter of God's grace, and is out of our hands in every way.

In the Episcopal church, we believe that spiritual birth comes after baptism, and occurs when we experience a saving faith. That happens when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Then we embark on a spiritual journey where our belief takes root, the Holy Spirit shows forth through us in our lives, and by the Spirit we can know God's will for us.

This process can occur in a moment, or more likely it will build and develop over time. And the saving faith that results is described by Jesus in today's reading. He said in verse fifteen that he would be lifted up, referring to his crucifixion to redeem us from sin, and that whoever believed in him in that way would have eternal life.

And then he followed with that well known passage from John 3:16 that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And everyone means everyone.

So we see a very orderly sequence in this reading from John. First, we must be born from above, or born again, to enter God's kingdom. Second, being born from above means being born of water and the Spirit. Third, we know that being born of water means our baptisms. Fourth, being born of the Spirit means we believe that Jesus was lifted up on the cross to die for us, and that belief leads us to life in the Spirit. And fifth, if we do believe and accept Jesus in that way, then we will have eternal life. All of that is in today's reading.

### **III.**

The essential element in this sequence is belief, which at times can be called faith. And I will come back to what it means to believe.

But first, I should talk a little about the term "born again" because some Christians look at it skeptically. In some charismatic or fundamentalist churches being born again is a litmus test for membership. People must claim a conversion experience to be part of the church. In itself, that might not be inconsistent with Scripture, but it can be perceived in a negative way.

You probably have heard about people being asked, point blank, if they have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. And if the answer is not "yes," they might be told they're not going to Heaven. Eternal damnation can loom large in how the Gospel is presented.

And although the basic theology of churches that operate in that way can be well-grounded in biblical teaching, it also can be presented in a dogmatic way that leads to misinterpretation.

This reminds me of the story about a man who owned a barber shop and who joined a fundamentalist church. He was told by his pastor one Sunday that as his Christian duty he must proclaim the doctrine of salvation in Christ to his customers and try to convert them. After all, they would be stuck in the barbers' chair and he would have a captive audience.

Well, being new to the church this fellow was a little nervous and self-conscious about doing this, and the following Monday several customers came in, had their hair cut, and he didn't say a thing. Finally he got up his nerve when his next customer came in and sat down. And as he was sharpening the razor, he nervously moved in front of the man with his razor still in hand, and asked in a loud voice, "Are you ready to die?"

Some born again advocates can come off that way. They present what some people call "brute force Gospel." Admittedly, that approach can reflect the Gospel and could have been taken from today's reading, but it is not always the best approach. Many people are more easily convinced by hearing what's right about Jesus rather than what's wrong with themselves.

The point here is that we should not tune someone out just because they use the words "born again." That idea is part of today's reading and contains Scriptural truth. If, however, the words seem difficult, it might be in the presentation of the message rather than its substance.

#### **IV.**

Let's come back to the crux of today's reading; the need to believe. What is belief? How do we believe in a Christian way? Well, it does not necessarily mean memorizing a lot of Bible verses. Atheists can do that, and some actually do in an attempt to use the Bible against us.

It also does not mean attending church every Sunday if it is just a routine. And it means more than just believing only in a creator God or having a vague idea of a supreme being. Some non-Christian religions accept those views of God but do not accept Jesus.

At the other end of the spectrum it also does not mean blind faith, unrelated to the content of Scripture. People can be misled into accepting religious ideas just because they have been told to do so. They don't try to understand what's behind those principles, and actually could believe the right things for the wrong reasons, or for no reasons. This can lead to an unhealthy reliance on fate as a controlling factor.

A story can illustrate this point. Two men saw each other at a high school reunion party. One man had worked hard, earned scholarships in college, and was very successful. The other fellow was somewhat lazy, didn't seem to put much effort into anything, but also was very successful.

The hard working fellow asked the other how he had done it. He said well, I just opened my Bible one day, put my finger on a page, and saw the word "gold." So, I invested in gold, the price went up, and I did very well. Later I tried it again. I opened my Bible, put my finger on a page, and saw the word "oil." So I invested in oil wells, and again made a lot of money.

That night the hard working guy went back to his hotel, and thought we would try what his lazy friend had done. So he took the Bible out of the night stand drawer, opened it, and randomly put his finger on a page. He looked down and was surprised to see that his finger was resting on "Chapter Eleven."

The point here is we are called to know what we believe, and to understand why we believe it. Today's Gospel gives us the basics. It tells us Jesus Christ was lifted up on the cross, and was crucified and died for our sins. It also tells us that God caused this to happen because of his love for the world. Then, if we believe this actually happened, and if we accept Jesus in that way, the Holy Spirit acts within us and we are born from above as Jesus said. And finally, with that belief we become inheritors of the great Christian hope of eternal life in God's presence.

#### **V.**

So, do we see ourselves in Nicodemus, or do we have a better understanding? I think we should be miles ahead of Nicodemus. When he talked to Jesus the New Testament had not even been written. Jesus was still alive. The crucifixion and resurrection were still in the future.

That was part of Nicodemus' problem. He was not able to see how it all fit together. We, however, have over two thousand years of historical knowledge, religious tradition, and spiritual guidance from Scripture that was not available to Nicodemus.

And while many things in the Christian faith are mysteries or cannot be explained in rational terms, the story of salvation is clear. We might not know the details of what the next world will be like, but we do know what we have to do in this world to get there. *Amen.*