

“Being Born Anew”
May 8, 2011

1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

Can you imagine traveling with a friend – on foot, in a car, on a plane or a train – after you’ve both been through a painful, puzzling, and poignant few days? Days of hope, of loss, of being astounded and perplexed.

If you can, try to imagine yourself on a modern-day walk or drive or ride to Emmaus. You and your friend are talking, speculating, *wondering* just what in the world – what in the *cosmos* – has been going on. Then, out of the blue, someone joins you and listens to your story – maybe she’s another walker or a hitchhiker you just couldn’t refuse; maybe he’s a flight attendant or an Amtrak employee.

Imagine that, after you’ve told this stranger what’s on your minds and what’s troubling your hearts, she tells you and your friend, in so many words, that you really are a couple of do-do heads, and then she starts to explain the happenings of the last few days to you.

And, now, imagine, if you can, that this stranger, this new theological guide says this to you:

“If you believe in God, live in reverent fear.”

At this point, you may be thinking, “Hmmm. ‘Sounds like we’re in for some hellfire and brimstone and maybe even a prediction that the world will be coming to an end soon.’”

Fortunately or unfortunately, you don’t have an easy way to ditch this stranger, so you’re stuck as she continues. “You know that you were ransomed from your futile ways, inherited from your parents and teachers, not with perishable things like silver or gold or smart phones or real estate. You know that you were ransomed with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.”

At this point, you’re looking more and more desperately for a way to get some distance from this stranger, but, before you can, she goes on. “Through Christ you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God. You have been purified so that you can have genuine mutual love. [Now, at this point, you breathe a sigh of relief – at least genuine mutual love is something you’re more interested in than being ransomed by anyone’s blood.] Love one another deeply from the heart. [You’re still breathing a little easier. Maybe this message won’t be so bad, after all.]”

But your unexpected companion isn’t finished. With passion, conviction, and a fire in her eyes, she proclaims to you, “You have been born anew of imperishable seed.”

Suddenly, you stop breathing. You’ve heard the words that are like the most powerful of spring pollens, clogging up your willingness to keep listening, instead of clogging up your nose. You’ve heard too much. The stranger has gone too far because she has started talking about being born again.

She has taken you past your breaking point, past the limits of your tolerance. You quit listening, you close your eyes, and you start promising yourself that as soon as your walk or drive or ride is over, you will not rest until you find someone who sells the bumper-stickers that say, “Born OK the First Time.” You promise yourself that you will find those bumper-stickers, ASAP, and you will buy dozens of them. You promise yourself that, someday very soon, your car, your house, your bicycle, your office, and maybe even your forehead will be adorned with

that message, so you might ward off any other strangers who might want to talk to you about being born again.

Now, maybe I've painted this scene a little too broadly, a bit over the top. If someone came up to you and starting paraphrasing this morning's reading from 1 Peter, maybe you *wouldn't* respond by, in effect, putting your fingers in your ears and singing, "La la la la la." Maybe you wouldn't. But maybe you would.

Let's face it, the words "born again" and even its more subtle cousin "born anew" represent an idea, a theology, that leaves many a progressive Christian a little squeamish, a little "squirmy." Think back a few decades, to a 1970's Presidential election. Telling the world that he was a born-again Christian may have won Jimmy Carter quite a few votes in the Bible Belt, but I'm willing to bet a good sushi dinner that it *cost* him a lot of votes in sophisticated places like, oh, say, Sonoma, California.

But even though some folks, here and elsewhere, might consider this notion of being born again a little embarrassing and might wish it would just go away, fading quickly into the background, it's a notion – and a *reality* – that's woven into the earliest parts of the Christian story and woven into nearly 2000 years of Christian experience. Whether we think of it as the theological equivalent of a backwoods country cousin or of a beloved, blessing life companion, the invitation to be born anew, to be born again, is here to stay.

So, instead of trying to ignore it or ridicule it, let's invite it into this sanctuary and into this moment and try to discover what kind of experience being born anew might be.

Recovering addicts and alcoholics know a great deal about being born again, although they might not like the specific words, either. After years and often decades of being wrapped up and wrung out by trying to run away from who we are or who we're afraid we are ... After years and often decades of using drugs, alcohol, people, ideas, and heaven only knows what else to construct a life that is in fact lifeless ... After years of living without true peace or love, or without a true sense of who we are, something happens.

Something opens our eyes to the nightmare our lives have become, and, with the love of others and the grace of God pouring through everyone and everything, we start to become born anew. Where once we were focused on ourselves and our strangely inflated and yet battered egos, we discover that we are being made new, healed and loved and led into a new life that was God's promise of a fullness of life all along.

Of course, not everyone becomes an addict or alcoholic, thanks be to God. But Christianity and the world's other religious traditions and mystical teachings remind us that the spiritual path invites us to die to ourselves again and again and again, and to be born again.

So, in this morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke, the Christ who met Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus opened their eyes and reminded them, retaught them, the Gospel he had lived and died. The Christ who met them on the road and sat down to eat with them opened their hearts to the Gospel that called them -- and calls *us* -- to surrender all of who we are and what we have to the workings of the Spirit. The Christ who became known to them in the breaking of the bread calls us to die to what Richard Rohr calls our small selves and then live and share the very Gospel that Jesus lived and shared.

But what is this Gospel that offers life anew, born again life? That's a question that anyone can, quite literally, spend an entire lifetime exploring and answering and even preaching. The Gospel is both extraordinarily simple and unendingly mysterious. It's something I hope and pray that you and I and those who have yet to come through those doors will spend many more months and years discovering together.

For this morning, though, I'd like to let the British historian Diarmaid MacCulloch offer an answer. Prof. MacCulloch starts by inviting us to realize that the actual Gospels themselves – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – were an unusual kind of writing in the ancient world. They are biographical, of course, providing at least bits and pieces of someone's life story, but that doesn't make them unusual, because biographies of famous people were common in Jesus' time. No, what makes these Gospels unusual is that they are what he calls a "'down-market' variety of biography, in which ordinary people reflect on their experience of Jesus, where the powerful and the beautiful generally stay on the sidelines of the story, and where it is often the poor, the ill-educated and the disreputable whose encounters with God are most vividly described."¹

This is the Gospel that doesn't simply seek to call Jesus' *followers* to be born anew. This is the Gospel that seeks to turn the world as it usually functions on its head. This is the Gospel that has been and still is at work, moving the *world* to being born again. As Prof. MacCulloch describes it, this Gospel that seeks to have the world re-born into the Kingdom or Commonwealth of God is most definitely not "gentle, weak or mild" in its efforts to create something new in all of us. The sayings of Jesus at the heart of the Gospel form "a chorus of love directed to the loveless or unlovable, of painful honesty ... and of joyful rejection of any counsel suggesting careful self-regard or prudence."²

In other words, whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here, and you can expect to be loved even when you are unlovable. You are welcome here, and you can expect to be called into a new life of love, honesty, and a strange and exhilarating rejection of self-centeredness.

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So what does it look like to be born anew? What does it look like to be born again into a new freedom to follow wherever the Spirit of the Living God may lead?

To answer that question on this Mother's Day, I'd like us to consider Julia Ward Howe, the woman who wrote the words to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" at the beginning of the Civil War, 150 years ago. She had attended a Union soldiers' revival camp meeting that had stirred her deeply. She went home after that experience and wrote about the Lord's terrible swift sword and the Lord's truth marching on. Nine years later, though, after the horror and bloodshed and death of the Civil War, she became one of the first people to call for a national Mother's Day. At a time in the world's history that may not be all that different from ours, when much of the world was still enamored of violence and retribution and more violence, Julia Ward Howe seems to have been born anew. It is a very different voice from the one we hear in the Battle Hymn of the Republic that calls out in this *Mother's Day Proclamation* of 1870:

Arise, then, women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts,
Whether our baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly:

"Our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.

¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First 3000 Years* (Viking: 2010), p. 77.

² P. 88.

We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country
To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

From the bosom of the devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own.
It says: "Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice."
Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession.
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war,
Let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel.

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"Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice. Blood does not wipe out dishonor, nor violence indicate possession." These words powerfully suggest that Julia Ward Howe was born anew.

And just as God worked through her and through her life, calls her to be born anew, God calls us to be born anew. The Spirit longs for us to surrender to a new life, in which we experience the fullness of Divine Love for ourselves, a new life in which we at last come to see that no one, not even our worst enemy, is outside the embrace of that Love.

May the Ever-new Spirit of All Life open our hearts and our lives to being born anew.
Amen.

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