

1 Sermon, February 23, 2014

Texts: Titus 3:1-7, John 3:1-11

Title: "UM Stuff: New Birth, Regeneration"

1. Are you born again?
2. A moral rebirth, not necessarily an emotional one
3. For Wesley, that meant claiming your sinfulness, and God entering in
4. Claiming your shadow mission
5. You may well have been born again without calling it that

1. Are you born again?

I remember, when I was about 18 years old, my father went to a training for Sunday School teachers. My Dad had been teaching Sunday School for a number of years, leaving my Mom in worship by herself. At least one person at first thought my Mom was a widow, since she didn't see Dad in worship with her.

Well, my Dad went to a Sunday School teacher training, and one of the participants piped up and said, "I think all Sunday School teachers should be born-again Christians."

My Dad said, seriously interested, "What's a born-again Christian?"

I'm sure my Dad was regarded as some kind of heathen by the one who had made the statement about the need for born-again teachers.

But my pastor at the time told me that it was a very good question. What, in fact, is a born-again Christian?

Biblically, new birth was connected to Baptism. One of the central meanings of baptism is that it is a sign of new birth.

In today's reading from Paul's letter to Titus, he writes:

"...when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Titus 3:4-5, NRSV.

The Greek word for "rebirth" (*paliggenesia*) was used by Jews to speak of the renewing of the world in the time of the Messiah. God's cosmic act of renewing the earth becomes intensely personal for each person baptized.

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At the time Paul wrote, it was assumed that baptism would accompany rebirth, a turning from one's old ways to a new understanding of God working in you and in the world. Christianity was new, and new Christians were being made all the time.

Then and now, this new birth is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is something that is done in the heart.

But now we don't assume that new birth and baptism necessarily accompany each other. Rather, baptism is a sign of what God is doing and can do in the human heart, but not that the new birth has already occurred for that person.

2. A moral rebirth, not necessarily an emotional one

In our own United Methodist tradition, John Wesley thought that being born again was an absolute necessity. It was an absolute necessity for going to heaven, and it was a necessity for being happy in this life.

Wesley wrote that the new birth was something that God did in your heart at the moment you saw your own sinfulness and fell to your spiritual knees before Christ.

The confessing your own sinfulness he called justification.

What God did in the heart at the same time he called rebirth.

But before I get into the theology, let me say what rebirth is not.

The popular idea of being born again in American culture is that it is an emotional experience. In movies, in preaching, it's often assumed that being born again gives you a kind of emotional high, and now you are joy-filled all the time. The focus in American culture is on feelings.

But that's not exactly it, according to Wesley. Wesley talks about the new birth as a *moral* experience. When Wesley speaks of the love of God being in a person's heart, it is not a feeling; it is an inclination to do good which may or may not be joined by feeling.

The new birth will lead to joy of the most simple and profound kind, but the new birth in itself is a moral awakening, not an emotional high.

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Wesley himself was a joyful person. "Sour godliness is the devil's religion," was one of his sayings. He told Mr. Blackwell that he could not bear to have people about him who were in ill humor, and he did his best to cure them.

Dr. Johnson, one of the great wits of Wesley's time, once said: "John Wesley's conversation is good, but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have his talk out, as I do." On another occasion Johnson said, "I hate to meet John Wesley; the dog enchants you with his conversation, and then breaks away to go and visit some old woman."

3. For Wesley, that meant claiming your sinfulness, and God entering in

Biblically and theologically, John Wesley talked about the new birth as a renewal of God's original image in us.

Genesis tells us that God created humankind in God's image. That image, Wesley tells us, is love. It could also be called "righteousness and true holiness."

However, humankind was also created able to stand, and yet liable to fall. Because sin entered in, the original image was obscured, and with the eating of the fruit in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve died to God; they lost the knowledge and the love of God.

We are in that same condition: being born in sin, we must be born again in order for God's image of love to be renewed in us.

The method of being born again is hard to describe. The spirit blows as does the wind, and it is the Holy Spirit that makes this change in the heart.

Wesley writes that a baby has eyes, but before being born can see little. So it is with spiritual rebirth: "before a person is born of God, he has, in a spiritual sense, eyes and sees not; a thick impenetrable veil lies upon them."

But when born again, a person feels "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him; and all his spiritual senses are then exercised to discern spiritual good and evil."

Just as a baby begins breathing at birth, so being born again means that a kind of spiritual respiration occurs: "Grace is descending into his heart; and prayer and praise ascending to heaven." It's like breathing in and out.

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John Wesley said that this new birth, this new awareness, this new relationship with God continues, and he called that continuation “sanctification.”

The moment of the new moral awareness is new birth. The growing in that new moral awareness is sanctification.

4. Claiming your shadow mission

That’s the short version. Wesley’s sermon on the new birth would go on for another 20 minutes, at least.

But I’d like to illustrate the new birth using a book that captures some of the idea. The book is called “Overcoming Your Shadow Mission.”

The idea of the book is that each of us have a mission given to us by God. Our mission may be to feed the hungry, or to make a difference in the political process so that there are fewer hungry people. Our mission may be to comfort the afflicted, or to lead others toward Christ.

But each of us also has a shadow mission, something that our sinful human side wants to do. The author of the book says that his shadow mission could be summed up in a four word headline: “Talkative Boy Wins Acclaim.” His shadow mission was to impress people so they would like him.

That probably isn’t your shadow mission. Your shadow mission may be one of the top ten shadow missions:

1. just give me home, health, and a hefty 401k
2. Busy, busy, busy
3. I don’t care who’s in charge—as long as it’s me
4. Show me the money
5. It really is all about me
6. Maintaining hidden addictions
7. I’ll think about it tomorrow
8. Looking nice by avoiding conflict
9. Climb the ladder first, put people second
10. Shop ‘til you drop

You get the idea. There is one thing that is the thing you are most tempted to do that substitutes for your real mission — but that thing is selfish or lazy or stuck in what’s not really real.

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John Wesley would have said that justification is knowing your shadow mission. But at the same time as you are justified, you find out who you *can be*, by God's grace. That's re-birth.

Rebirth is what allows you to go on from there, overcoming sin and growing in love.

5. You may well have been born again without calling it that

Does that sound a little different than what you maybe assumed being born again was? Does that sound a little more real?

I hope so, because the new birth is really not about how good we are at faith. It has nothing to do with our own effort. We don't have to earn it, and it may or may not be flashy or remarkable.

The new birth is really that doorway by which we rely on God, and enter into a conscious process of seeking to become what God wants us to become.

Many of you have experienced this re-birth, only you didn't know that's what it was called. Even if you were raised in the church, there's a point where you choose faith for yourself because you've discovered that everything else is false or somehow less.

I hope that today you will appreciate what God has already done and is doing in you. Amen.