

### *Shaped by New Birth*

“Becoming Authentically Human: Called and Shaped by Jesus” - Part II

John 3:1-17; Psalm 121; Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

March 20, 2011

I have asked this question before: Do you see humans as basically good or basically evil? Or maybe the more base question is do you see yourself as basically good or basically evil?

The Bible tells us that as humans we were all originally created in the image of God. It doesn't get much better than that. But then, just like Humpty Dumpty, we all had a great fall! Yes, it began with Adam & Eve, but the great fall has been passed on to all of us. In the New Testament reading from last week, Romans 5:12, it tells us that “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.” Of course it isn't just Adam & Eve's fault, it's all of ours. It could have just as easily have been Dick & Mary . . . because God tells us, also in Romans (3:23) “for all have sinned and fall short of His glory.” And it really isn't that important how we view ourselves, what is most important is how God views us, before redemption:

*As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are like open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

Romans 3:10-18 (NIV)

Without any intervention from God, those verses adequately reflect our human condition. None of us really like to hear that. But how we see ourselves, in relation to God, makes all the difference in the world. It makes all the difference whether we experience eternity in God's kingdom or not. How we perceive ourselves, either as basically good or basically evil, determines our need for a Savior or not. The words of the psalmist this morning:

*I lift up my eyes to the hills - where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Psalm 121:1-2 (NIV)

The story of the Old Testament is really a story of human fallenness. Created in the image of God, but falling far short of His glory. And on our own we are in no position to do anything about it. But God, in His great love for humankind, has chosen to reach down and to take matters into His own hands. And He has chosen to do so by reaching down and calling a certain people to be His own. A people who will respond to His great love.

He originally chose the Israelites, through Abram who would become Abraham - “the father of many nations.” He called a people who would be faithful to the calling. And at times the Israelites were faithful to the calling, but more often than not, they were not. The story of the Israelites is not so much a story of their faithfulness, but a story of God's faithfulness. They

often drifted away. They moaned and they groaned. They were impatient when they couldn't see God at work. They became disobedient, often choosing to walk in their own ways. God would eventually send them into exile. God, speaking through His prophets, would call His people back, to return to Him. The prophet Ezekiel would call for a new heart:

*"I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."*  
Ezekiel 11:19-20 (NIV)

*"Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!"*  
Ezekiel 18:30-32 (NIV)

Ezekiel was not talking about just a change of heart, he was talking about a new heart. And where was it to come from?

*"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."*  
Ezekiel 36:24-27 (NIV)

Just notice how many "I's" are in those three verses. The "I's" representing the divine intervention from God. On our own we are helpless to change us from our sinful condition. Where does my help come from? "My help comes (only) from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." And it comes only through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday Alex looked at Jesus' temptation, after fasting for 40 days in the wilderness, that which followed his baptism and the descending of the Holy Spirit upon him. Satan wanted to get Jesus to accept any way other than trusting in God. Jesus, being not only human, but divine, perfect, and sinless, did not give in. Then Jesus begins his ministry. And he begins his ministry by preaching. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matt. 4:17 NIV). "Repent, change, for there is no other way to enter the kingdom."

Fairly early on in Jesus' ministry we have his encounter with Nicodemus, recorded in John 3, one in which it seems we have looked at quite a bit recently. It is the core of who we are as Christians, but we need to be careful that we don't pass Christianity off as being easy. Because on our own is it not only hard, it is impossible. Nicodemus, by all accounts was a deeply religious man. A devout Jew. A member of the Jewish ruling council. It didn't get much better than that in Jesus' day. But Nicodemus saw something different in Jesus. And apparently he knew that there was something missing in his own life or his way of life. It doesn't really say what he came to Jesus for. Other than he knew Jesus had come from God because of all the

miraculous signs he was doing, and he recognized him as a great teacher, even called him “Rabbi.” It doesn’t really say why Nicodemus went looking for Jesus, but Jesus wasn’t going to miss this opportunity: *Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (born anew, born from above).”* John 3:3 (NIV)

Nicodemus just couldn’t understand this. How could one really be born again? What was Jesus talking about?

*Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again (born from above) The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.’”*

John 3:5-8 (NIV)

A lot of different interpretations of the phrase “born of water and the spirit.” Some say it signifies two separate births; our first birth, our physical birth - in water representing the fluid in the amniotic sac, which any husband hearing the words of his pregnant wife, “my water just broke,” can relate to. And the second birth, of the spirit, when God sends his Holy Spirit upon us. Then there are some that say “born of water and the spirit” is representative of the two different births that need to take place in a person’s life before salvation takes place. First, water representing purification/cleansing from our sins and then baptism by the Holy Spirit. First John the Baptist came, preparing the way, telling people to “repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins,” and then Jesus who would die on the cross for the forgiveness of those sins, paving the way for receiving the Holy Spirit. Is one interpretation right and the other wrong? I tend to think that they are both right. One cannot experience the kingdom of God without two births.

After Jesus’ death on the cross, and his resurrection, and then his ascension back to heaven, after he told his disciples to wait until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, then Peter in his first sermon, recorded in Acts 2:

*“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*

Acts 2:38-39 (NIV)

Not only do we have the prophets in the Old Testament who preached the need for a new birth, signified by the changing of one’s heart - the removal of the heart of stone replaced by a heart of flesh, and Jesus’ words to Nicodemus, “you must be born again,” it was clearly understood by the early apostles that a new birth needed to take place. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to Titus 3:1-7,

*... But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

Titus 3:4-7 (NIV)

Paul told the people from the church at Ephesus to “put off your old self . . . and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24)

“You must be born again.” Jesus doesn’t seem to leave much wiggle room in that statement. He doesn’t say, “only those who have not been raised in the faith need to be born again.” In fact Nicodemus was one who was raised in the faith. A good devout Jew. As religious as they come. Most likely lived an obedient life that would put most of us to shame. Yet Jesus told him, “you must be born again.” Poor Nicodemus just didn’t understand. He couldn’t understand. He had yet to receive the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus came in the darkness, and he left in the darkness because he couldn’t see the light. To be born again, born from above, by water and the Spirit, to believe in Jesus, is to leave the darkness and to come into the light. Nicodemus was not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus. He wanted to keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. His imagination is caught by Jesus, but he wants to compartmentalize whatever faith he has. At this point in Nicodemus’ life he is not ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to let it change his life. Jesus won’t have anything to do with that type of faith.

Unfortunately where Nicodemus was at in his faith at that point of his life, is where many Christians are at today. “Easy believism” - belief without repentance, belief without change, belief without new birth. For many Christians, the gospel is summarized by Jesus’ words in John 3:16, “Everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life.” For many Christians, understanding faith which leads to salvation is just something that we do with our mind and our lips. That is not what the Bible teaches. Being born from above and believing in Jesus is not just what we do with our minds and lips, but also with our heart and our entire lives.

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers (and sisters).*

Romans 8:28-29 (NIV)

“Then when they have conformed to the image of God and have been born of God and also abide in God, they do not sin, for the seed of God remains in them; and they have overcome the world. They are crucified to the world, and the world unto them; they have mortified their flesh and have buried their sinful body with Christ in baptism, with its lusts and desires, and no longer sin unto unrighteousness, but much more righteousness unto sanctification. For they have put on Christ and are purified through the Holy Spirit in their consciences from dead works to serve the living God; bringing forth through the Spirit the fruits of the Spirit, whose end is eternal life.”

Menno Simons, *The Spiritual Resurrection* (1536)

“In your life you must be so converted and changed that you become new men in Christ, so that Christ is in you and you are in Christ. Otherwise you can never be Christians, for, *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* (2 Corinthians 5:17)”

Menno Simons, *The New Birth* (1537)

Of course we know, that even after our new birth, because there is part of our sinful human nature that still lives within us, and we battle it each and every day, we still continue to sin at times. The apostle Paul understood that, when he writes in Romans 7, “I do not understand what I do. For what I do not want to do I do, and what I want to do I do not do.” But if we truly have been reborn, sin no longer reigns within our bodies, we are no longer slaves to sin as Paul writes. And the change should be evident to all. The change should be evident in the fruit which we bear - the fruit of the Holy Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control and the fruit we produce.

Why are we saved? Is it just for ourselves? That is again our individualistic, narcissistic culture talking. God didn't reach down into our world, through the torture and death on the cross of his perfect, sinless Son, Jesus Christ just to save us for ourselves. He did it so we who have been saved “might bear fruit to God” (Romans 7:4). Eternal life is just one of the benefits that comes with it.

Jesus invitation to Nicodemus back then is also for us today. He invites us to open our imaginations and reconsider our own relationship with God. Are we being reborn, renewed today? How might God be recreating your heart? Are there areas in your life in which you need to come out of the darkness and into the light? All we can do is open ourselves up for God to work through His Holy Spirit. Rebirth is God's gift to give, God's work to accomplish, and it is God who labors to bring us new life, each and every day.

### **Come, gracious Spirit** **#303**

Come, gracious Spirit, heavenly Dove, with light and comfort from above.  
Come, be our guardian and our guide; over every thought and step preside,  
over every thought and step preside.

The light of truth to us display and make us know and choose your way.  
Plant holy fear in every heart, that we from God may never depart,  
that we from God may never depart.

Lead us to Christ, the living Way, nor let us from his pastures stray.  
Lead us to holiness, the road that we must take to dwell with God,  
that we must take to dwell with God.

Lead us to heaven, that we may share fullness of joy forever there.  
Lead us to our eternal rest, to be with God forever blessed,  
to be with God forever blessed.

Simon Browne (1720)