

No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, or the more popular translation, “without being born again.” So, let me ask you, have you been born again? That question has baggage with some of you, perhaps a lot of baggage. In our country, being born again speaks to a one-time personal experience with God, after which your life is never the same, like Saul on the Damascus Road. For most of us, that’s simply not been our experience. Many of us experience faith as an unfolding process as opposed to a one-off, world altering event. In addition, to be a born-again Christian has a host of theological baggage as well like affirming the literal truth of every word of the scriptures. It’s makes salvation exclusively about the afterlife, and Christianity as the world’s only true religion. Everyone else is said or at least implied to be hell bound. Considering all this baggage, many people want nothing to do with being born again.

Here’s my real question: can we begin again with being born-again, or is this metaphor a lost cause? I think we need to reclaim it, because at the heart of this metaphor is our need for change, the need for new beginnings, and new ways of seeing the world, and boy, do we need that right about now. One of the great dangers of our times is our ever-deepening polarization. Sociologists have noted for decades that our communities are becoming increasingly occupied by people who live, think, and vote like we do. Bill Bishop’s 2008 book *The Big Sort* chronicles how Americans have sorted themselves geographically, economically, and politically into like-minded communities, and the danger this kind of segregation is to our democracy. I don’t think it’s gotten better since then. Perhaps what we need is to begin again, to be willing to see the world anew, to look upon our neighbors, those across the pew, those we don’t understand, with new eyes.

**Nicodemus** was a leader in his community, a well-respected Pharisee who comes to Jesus under the cover of night, as a seeker. Our Lenten theme this year is seeking, asking honest questions for deeper faith. Last week we followed Jesus to the wilderness and asked the question, who will you listen to? This week we witness Jesus invite Nicodemus to begin again, but Nicodemus has a hard time embracing new beginnings, and so do we. It’s interesting that Nicodemus comes by night, isn’t it? It seems he has a lot to lose by seeking out Jesus. In some communities, it’s not safe to be a seeker. To have questions about your faith, to have doubts, to wonder and seek something deeper, is in many religious communities highly suspect. For many, religion is about finding answers and certainty. It’s not about asking questions and holding wonder, but Jesus welcomes our questions, even when they come by the cover of night.

Nicodemus begins by complimenting Jesus, perhaps flattering him, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher from God. Jesus ignores the flattery, and cuts right to the chase, saying, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicky boy, if you want to be a part of what God is doing here and now, then you must be born again. Nicky then makes the all-too-common mistake of taking Jesus’ words literally and asks if he is expected to re-enter his mother’s womb, a strange image to be sure. But Jesus is speaking in metaphor, which is the only way we can understand the things of God. All our language of God falls short, and the very best we can do is speak in image and metaphor. Jesus isn’t talking about literally re-entering the womb, but he is talking about beginning again, and **all beginnings are hard**. New beginnings can be so hard, that sometimes I wonder if re-entering the womb would be easier. Nicodemus has a lot at stake here. As a leader of the Pharisees, he’s attained a level of power and respect. How can he begin again when he’s already achieved so much? How can he learn to see the world

afresh and allow the Spirit to take him into the unknown? That was hard for him, and it's hard for us too. When we've been taught to see the world a certain way, it's difficult to begin again.

Twenty-one years ago, I had just graduated from Ohio State. I was working as a campus minister for the church where Sarah and I met. It was a lovely, evangelical church that met in a movie theater. It was a church that took itself too seriously and had a lot of fun. There was a lot of energy with very little wisdom, an apt summary of who I was as well. At 23 years old, I had my life mapped out. Sarah and I were engaged, and I was going to be a pastor at our campus church for many years to come.

Once we were engaged, I got to meet Sarah's home pastor, Rob Weingartner, who was a PCUSA minister. I remember meeting in his office, and we talked about life, marriage, and theology. I remember saying something to him to the effect of, "You Presbyterians ordain women, which I wish I could agree with. I just can't get there biblically." And Rob was so patient. He said, if you're interested, I could share some material with on why ordaining women is Biblical. I was skeptical. I had read the Bible through multiple times already. I knew what it said, so I wasn't sure what he could share that would change my mind, but I took the book and articles he shared and told him I'd read them.

One article was called "Women in the New Testament" by Presbyterian scholar Kenneth Bailey. I read it, and I read it again, and I read it again, and it floored me. Bailey was reading the Bible with more depth, insight, and cultural understanding than I had ever seen before. Even if I didn't agree with him, it was clear how much he respected the Bible. It was also clear to me that **I might be wrong**, something I would need to learn many times over. I'm still learning it. Maybe women could be pastors. If that was true, then I needed to reevaluate everything. It didn't happen in an instant. It didn't happen overnight, but that was the beginning of a new birth in my life. Fourteen years later, I was ordained as a PCUSA pastor. Five years after that, Covenant called me as their pastor. Because of what Rob shared with me, I was born again, and my world was never the same.

Being born physically happens once in our life, but being born again happens over and over. Jesus says, "**The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.**" When the Spirit of God takes us places we never imagined we'd end up, we are born again. God has destinations for us travel, the likes of which we know nothing about. God has places to take us if only we are willing to begin again, and again, and again.

Right now, our church is considering taking new steps of welcome and inclusion toward people who have been systemically excluded from churches including this one. These steps mark a new beginning for Covenant, one that many of you welcome and others of you might not be so sure. It's hard to begin again. A few months back I was speaking with someone about LGBTQ inclusion, and they said to me, "You're asking me to say that what my parents taught me was wrong." That's a hard thing to admit, isn't it? I can hear Nicodemus saying, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

New beginnings are hard, but Jesus assures Nicodemus, and he assures us, when the Spirit is leading us, we will find ourselves in places we never expected. I certainly have. From a Biblical literalist who was convinced the earth was only 10,000 years old and couldn't imagine a woman pastor to where I am today, it makes me wonder, where will the Spirit lead next? One thing we can know for sure, **wherever God is leading us, it's all for the sake of love.** Because

with God, that's what it's all about. That's all it's ever been about. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him, who trust in this love, may not perish but may have eternal life. Eternal life begins right here and now when we begin again. That love will lead us back to each other. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.

Jesus came as the embodiment of divine love, a love that does not condemn us but saves us. In this time of new beginnings, God's love will save us again, and again, and again.