

Sermon from Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy
Sunday, May 30, 2021

Being Born Again: A Worldly Interpretation

John 3:1-21

Perhaps no Scripture defines as much of American Christianity as John 3. A Methodist theologian in the last century said that John 3:16 was the most important verse in the Bible. In the 1970's we had the "Born Again Movement." An evangelical was elected president and publicly said he was "born again." As the King James Version puts it, "YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN". Entire battalions of Christians were taught to wander around asking total strangers, "Are you born again?"

What if there's more to "born again" than evangelical strictures. What if "born again" describes much more than an individual response?

Being born again is tied to God loving the whole world. John 3 is not about you and me; it's about God and the world. The other readings from our lectionary offer backup for this worldly interpretation. Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord." Psalm 29 insists that we ascribe to God the glory of God's name because the voice of God is powerful. Romans 8 – "all who are led by the Spirit are children of God." And just in case it's needed, I have some backup material for the backup material. John Howard Yoder, reading II Corinthians 5:17 notes that there's no need to link "**new creation**" with the individual person. Indeed, we could read, "If one is in Christ, **behold a whole new world.**" **A WHOLE NEW WORLD! GET IT? God and the world.** It's all about God and about God's power bringing God's world to a new birth. "A new creation is everything!" (Galatians 6:15).

God loving the world underscores the corporate nature of being born again. New Testament scholar John Meier observed that the standard English translations of John 3:16 obscure the "verbal and theological collision" captured in the Greek, which positions *God* right next to *world*, or *cosmos*— "for so loved God the world." The point is clear: improbably, shockingly, God loves the actual world, the God-despising world. God loves the world with such ferocity that God draws near to save, even to dwell among us in the flesh.

There's plenty that needs to be born again in our part of the world – the United States of America. Given that biblical reality of God and world, it is only right for me to say that the United States needs to be born again. The nation of my birth, the country I

love, the national anthem that can bring tears to my eyes, needs to be born again. This is Memorial Day weekend, and it is a part of the sacred canopy of American civil religion. We can wave old glory with pride, but unless we are giving glory to God, we are still in trouble. America needs a born-again experience to save us from our lust for violence and war. May God make us sick of war until we stockpile our bombs and mothball our missiles. The nation will be born again when God's kingdom reigns in God's son because "he shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Until that moment we are still straining to be born, groaning against the yoke of violence.

America sees itself as more religious than modern, secular Europe, and consequently, we are also more self-confidently patriotic and comfortable with our power and rights. More Americans go to church than Europeans but that has not made us more Christian. Once Americans were convinced that they were Christians, it was only a short step across the Jordan River (symbolically) to claim that America was God's new holy land, and American Christians God's new chosen people. Having confidently asserted that they were Christians, American Christians were then able to justify whatever they do and say as Christian even when the actions are unchristian. These are the two great confidences of many American Christians: America is a Christian nation, and we are a righteous people who have a right to go to war at any time against whomever we please because we are the power. American Christian confidence is now based not on the cross and resurrection but upon secular military power and economic wealth. We are number one and that means we can pretty much do as we please. America needs to be born again from this idolatry.

America needs to be born again from our economic frenzy and fear. A powerful theological voice in America puts it plainly: "Free-market fundamentalism – just as dangerous as the religious fundamentalisms of our day – trivializes the concern for public interest. The overwhelming power and influence of plutocrats in the economy put fear and insecurity in the hearts of anxiety-ridden workers and render money-driven, poll-obsessed elected officials deferential to corporate goals of profit, often at the cost of common good." (Cornell West, *Democracy Matters*, 3).

But once I say that the world and the nation need to be born again, I can't help myself. I have to tell you that the church needs to be born again. The church has become "self-intoxicated and self-perpetuating" in so many ways. The church needs to be born again because the church has sold its soul to the politics of fear and violence. There are reasons people have left the church, but the church doesn't seem to get it. The church needs to be born again from her addiction to secular political power. Much of the church has more

desire to be in the White House than the Lord's house, more determination to be a Republican or a Democrat than a Christian.

Our church here needs time after time to be born again. God makes all things new, and it is time for us to embrace the new. "God is going to test this church by trying its old ways and bringing it through great demands and deeper commitments, until we say again: "Thy way, O Lord, not mine, thy will be done, not mine." EFC is no longer GE central. We all know that. Somebody, with corporate power, has dimmed the lights in Electric City. We are in a different place now than we were in 1970 or even 2000. We can't keep doing what worked in 1970 because it's not going to help us in 2021.

Well, if the nation needs to be born again and the church needs to be born again, it is so obvious that we, the people, need a new birth. Each one of us needs to be born again and again from our old ideas, ideologies, prejudices. Last week I watched a video where a motel owner called a guest "a dumb Democrat" and he meant it. This is how we think about one another. Even when we are nice on the surface, even when we go to church together, there is now a sense in America that the people on the other side are not our fellow disciples of Jesus, but a collection of dummies. They are not fellow believers, they are crazy. They are not one with us in faith and love, they are radical and demonic. They are not our brother or sister, but they are the enemy.

The church needs to be born again to our purpose: "for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Now, let's see if I can gather all this God and world talk into a reasonable conclusion. John Buchanan, when he was pastor of Fourth Street Presbyterian in Chicago, said that he once baptized a two-year-old child. He read the standard pronouncement from the prayer book: "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Unexpectedly, the child responded, "Uh-oh." Buchanan writes: "It was an appropriate response . . . a stunning theological affirmation." "Uh oh." Being born again into the reality of God's kingdom is a scary experience. The gospel, no matter what we have been told, is not our friend. The Gospel means to be our guiding light, our mentor, our master (but not in an exclusively male sense). The gospel challenges what needs challenging, confronts what needs confronting, and condemns what needs condemning. If your right hand offends, cut it off. If your right eye offends, pluck it out. The gospel demands allegiance. The gospel is not our friend.

This is a lot to absorb in a single sermon but maybe one or two of us need an "Uh oh" moment this morning, a new birth, a being born again for the fourth or fifth time. God calls some of us to be in mission to the streets of our city. "Uh oh!" God calls some of us to be in ministry of making sense of the twisted ways of our culture. "Uh oh!" God calls some of us to put down our old grudges. "Uh oh!" To let go of our animosities. "Uh oh!" Our addiction to secular politics over Jesus. "Uh oh!" After all, the gospel is one "uh oh" after "uh oh" – "uh on" "uh oh!" Amen.