



“Stirrings”

John 3:1-17

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

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A suspicious character! That is how the religious leaders of Israel viewed Jesus in the initial days of his ministry. However, their suspicion turned to hostility when Jesus announced he was launching a divine revolution intended to transform society. Jesus saw his mission as undermining the power of the ruling authorities by exposing how out of step they were with God. He called for an end to the oppression of the poor declaring that in God’s realm there will be justice and mercy for all. Those who had been pushed to the margins of society will receive elegantly engraved invitations to God’s realm. The outcasts will become in-casts.

When Jesus announced: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15) he was not waxing eloquently about God’s heavenly paradise that people would enter after death. He was talking about God’s realm breaking out on earth and he taught his followers to pray a radical prayer that included: “Thy kingdom come on *earth* as it is in heaven.”

The message of Jesus was exceptionally good news for those on the bottom floor of society, but it declared to those living in the penthouse that they were in a precarious position with God and needed to alter their ways. In every society, those benefitting from the status quo will mightily resist change, and the Pharisees of Jesus’ day hardened against him. To them, Jesus was not simply a nuisance, but a dangerous rebel. The Pharisees eyed Jesus like those in the Mubarak regime eyed the Google and Twitter kids of Egypt who called for radical changes.

However, the Gospel of John informs us that a person of prominence, a religious leader named Nicodemus, broke ranks with his cohorts. This Pharisee was intrigued by Jesus and drawn to him despite the ominous warnings of his friends.

Nicodemus could not pay a visit to Jesus in the light of day, because fellow Pharisees might think he was collaborating with the enemy. So Nicodemus went to Jesus after the sun had set to discover more about him. He said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Were his words sincere? Did he really believe Jesus was a spirit-filled messenger of God? Most of the other Pharisees believed Jesus was an emissary of Satan.

Nothing in the text suggests that Nicodemus was disingenuous. And the fact that he went to Jesus at night and alone suggests that he was earnest in his desire to figure out Jesus. Jesus does not reply to his inquiry with words aimed at gradually easing Nicodemus into his message. Jesus asserts that his mission is focused on transformation. He has come to change people, he

has come to change society and he has come to turn the world upside down. Jesus says, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being reborn from above.”

This is the famous “born again” passage that some Christians have interpreted as calling for a personal spiritual experience that determines whether or not you have been saved.

First, a word about the way different Bibles translate this particular Greek word that follows the word “born.” Some Bibles translate it as “again” so that it reads, “born again.” Others translate it as “above” so that it reads “born from above.” The Greek word can mean both “again” and “above” so I prefer to translate it “reborn from above.”

Many claim that being born again is a one-time emotional experience in which they felt truly loved and forgiven by God when they professed their belief in Jesus as their Savior. However, Jesus is focused on much more than simply an emotional high. That may be a piece of it for some people, but he is after more. He seeks to stir our souls, so that there is a change in our hearts, in our minds and especially in our actions. Time after time Jesus calls for a change in behavior. He commands us to love our neighbor and to treat others as we want to be treated. He calls on us to feed the hungry, to care for the ill, to share our wealth with the poor.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be reborn from above, Nicodemus is dazed and confused. He takes the words of Jesus literally when Jesus intends them metaphorically. Nicodemus tosses Jesus a couple of ridiculous questions: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

The reader understands that Jesus is talking about a spiritual reality. No one can enter God’s realm without a spiritual rebirth --a transformation that prompts us to see the world differently and to be in the world differently. And a spiritual rebirth is not a one-time event. God’s Spirit frequently attempts to grab our attention and to shake us from stale routines. God’s Spirit stirs within us to open our hearts, to sharpen our vision and to redirect our path. God wants us to seize new opportunities to enrich our lives and to enhance the world.

Ward Brehm is a Minneapolis businessman whose life was turned upside down. One day after church, his pastor asked him if he’d like to go to Africa. Brehm said, “He might as well have asked me if I wanted to go to the moon.”

Sensing his resistance, his pastor asked, “Will you pray about it?”

Brehm looked him square in the eye and said, “Arthur, you’re the minister, you pray about it. I’ll think about it.”

Two months later this businessman found himself standing in the airport with a ticket to Ethiopia. He met up with the group he would be traveling with and they were soon surrounded by a group of what Brehm called “church ladies.” They had shown up to send them off. The women instructed everyone to hold hands because they were going to pray. Unaccustomed to a public display of his faith, Brehm said he prayed all right. He prayed that none of his clients or business partners would walk by and see him.

They went to Africa for ten days, and Brehm says he has never been the same. “The moment I stepped onto African soil,” he said, “my life was altered.” He witnessed with his own eyes, a world that before had only existed for him as a set of statistics.

In Ethiopia he listened to surviving family members tell stories of loved ones who died during the years of famine. In Uganda he saw numerous people dying of AIDS. For the first time, the senselessness of people starving to death overwhelmed him.

When he returned home, he did not put his experience behind him as if he checked off another item on his bucket list. As he wrote in his book, *White Man Walking*, everything he thought he knew about the world, his life and God was up for grabs. When he was in Africa,

God seemed intensely close, much closer than back here in the states. With all of our comfort and privileges, we usually see God only when life falls apart. After his experience in Africa, he started to see God everywhere. Since that first trip nearly 20 years ago, Brehm has traveled to Africa regularly taking groups, especially groups of business executives, so that they can experience what he discovered.¹

God wants to change your life, to alter your existence. But if you are going to catch glimpses of God's kingdom and experience the divine realm, you must undergo spiritual rebirths. It's easy to get caught up in routines that distance you from God. It's so easy to slide into societal values that are at odds with the life God calls you to live. How can you be reborn from above so that your life is rich and radiant, beautiful and bountiful?

It's not something we can manufacture on our own. There is no step-by-step guide to follow. Jesus says God's Spirit is like the wind, it blows where it chooses and cannot be controlled. However, we can decide whether to be receptive or resistant to God's Spirit when it moves in our lives. Unfortunately, most of us find the status quo too comforting and we latch onto the security of the known even when it becomes dull and lifeless, rather than risk venturing into the unknown.

By the way, God's Spirit does not bypass you once you join AARP. No matter what your age, Christ calls you to be courageous and to pay attention to stirrings in your soul.

Are you experiencing a hard-to-name restlessness within that you need to face? Are you blocking out God's whispers that are calling you to forge a new path? Could God be nudging you to reassess your priorities? Has the vitality been drained from your life?

An invitation to serve people in need may open a door for you. Anger at an injustice may lead you to a renewed sense of purpose. A personal crisis might soften your heart and make you more compassionate to others who suffer. A comment by a friend or a verse of Scripture or a heartfelt prayer might spark an awakening in you.

God wants to get under your skin, into your heart and inside your brain to give birth to something new. Are you open to an adventure?

NOTES

1. Samuel T. Lloyd III, "When God Throws a Brick," *30 Good Minutes*, November 23, 2008.