

## “You Must Be Born Again”

- I. Introduction: This week I went on a two-day spiritual retreat. I drove early Thursday morning to the Convent of St. Helena in Augusta, Georgia, and then after meeting with my spiritual director, Sister Rosina, whom most of you have met, worshipped with the sisters in Vespers and Compline on Thursday and Matins and the Eucharist on Friday. I then returned to Knoxville to continue preparing for this weekend. I have taken such retreats previously since being ordained and have found them to be critical times of reflection, prayer, and scripture meditation. In doing this, I continue to honor the advice I was given by my mentors and teachers in seminary, by the Bishops where I have served, and by the Holy Spirit, who reminds me that at times I need to withdraw, cut down on the distractions and demands, and listen for the voice of God. You see, I am an off-the-chart “E” or “Extravert” on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. I thrive on interacting with the world around me. What is someone else’s distraction is for me an opportunity for connection. The challenge in being such a pronounced “E” is that I prefer interaction to reflection. I can miss the still small voice of God if I am not careful.
  
- II. This sermon. One of the things I meditated about while on retreat this week was this morning’s sermon. In the silence of the convent and the stillness of the night I pondered today’s Gospel from John, in which Nicodemus came to speak with Jesus under the cover of night. And I pondered what Jesus said to Nicodemus about eternal life: “You must be born again.” I also pondered what is perhaps the most well-known verse in the whole New Testament, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whosoever believes in him shall have eternal life.” Then lastly I pondered what God would have me say this morning in this sermon. Jesus gave Nicodemus crucial advice about how to become a disciple. In order for Nicodemus to enter the kingdom of God he did have to be born again. The Greek verb used by John for being reborn is “anathen.” *It means to be reborn in the spirit, to be spiritually transformed.* Jesus used this term “anathen” to refer to the changes that would take place in our spirits when they are affected by God’s Holy Spirit, the *ruach*. *In this process, spirit meets Spirit.* What Jesus told his disciples was, that for this rebirth to occur, they would need to willingly open themselves up to a process of change. And, it would be important for them to enter into this process knowingly, because their transformation would be far reaching. They would be altered and the change in them would become apparent. Many others would seek to be similarly reborn based upon what they saw in Jesus’ disciples.

As Jesus' disciples in the 21st century, can others see the transformation in us and know that it has made a difference that we have been reborn in the spirit? Let me tell you a story about that. One Sunday morning a Southern minister was shaking hands with worshipers as they left the church. One man who seldom attended was there that day. As he shook hands with the preacher, the preacher took his hands in both his hands and grasped them tightly and held on a little longer than normal as he said to him, "It's good to see you here today, Joe. But my friend, you need to belong to the army of the Lord!" The man replied, "I'm already in the army of the Lord, Pastor." The preacher then continued, "If you are, why don't we see you here but a few times a year?" The man replied, "Because I'm in the Secret Service."

- III. In contrast, as two thousand years of Christian experience have taught us, the kind of change and long-term effect that results from real spiritual rebirth cannot remain a secret. It is quite powerful and life altering. Being "reborn in the Spirit" and "being spiritually transformed" is what I believe we have been witnessing and experiencing here at Church of the Ascension in the past year. There is a birth of new life that cannot be denied. Visitors sense it when they join us for worship, and your leaders sense it when they initiate new projects. There are other indicators of our spiritual rebirth. Last week we reported that our pledge campaign had resulted in 300 pledges for a total of \$998,000. After the service, two different parishioners increased their pledges by \$2000 each, and within the week six more pledges were received. I'm not sharing this in order to emphasize numbers. The numbers are only by-products of something deeper and more profound – our spiritual rebirth and transformation as a community of believers. The way in which we share of our wealth reflects our gratitude to God for the way God has blessed us. It reflects our recognition that all we have and all we are as children of God has been given to us as gifts. It reflects the nature of our relationship with God.
- IV. In fact our transformation cannot really be measured in numbers. It is measured by the way in which we hold God closely and fully in our hearts. Our transformation comes out of knowing that we are loved and that we are invited to love back in return. Our transformation comes out of listening to what God is telling us and from telling God what is on our hearts. A transformation process then unfolds that lets the Holy Spirit work in our midst. When that happens the heat gets turned up. Dr. Donde Plowman spoke to us in adult Sunday School several weeks ago and shared about a process of renewal and rebirth in a large church in El Paso, Texas. As that church was "reborn" she said you could feel where the heat was. You could touch the excitement and enthusiasm of the people. The rebirth of that church was electric and far-reaching.

This I firmly believe is what is happening here. We have a new sense that God loves us profoundly. We are loved. We are lovable and we are blessed. Yet our current experience of transformation is not yet fully complete. The Holy Spirit is continuing to move us to new growth and change. Transformation here is underway, but it must be consistently recognized and nurtured. I believe that we are being invited by the Spirit to become excited about ministry opportunities here in the same way we have allowed the Spirit to move us in our stewardship. We are being invited to expand the number of parishioners who are involved in active ministry here, and we are also being invited to undertake new ministries together. We are seeing new ministries sprout up – for example the faithful group of people meeting on Tuesday evenings to prepare for Stephen Ministry, the Daughters of the King, and the young families group. We also see new energy in the core group of people working to re-build our youth program and in the Brotherhood. After Easter, we will have a ministry fair where each ministry in our church will have a table or booth and recruit volunteers. But you don't need to wait to volunteer! This morning you could let Ann O'Connor know that you will be willing to help with the Family Promise Program. You could sign up to take part in the overnight vigil on Maundy Thursday. There are multiple ongoing opportunities for ministry here at Ascension. I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit is moving among us, attempting to speak to each of us about what we are being called to do in ministry.

- IV. Conclusion. My sisters and brothers, this is what I bring back to you from my spiritual retreat. First, God loves us incredibly; secondly, God wants us to love God back; and thirdly, God wants our spiritual rebirth at this church to continue. God is not finished with us yet. In John chapter 19, Nicodemus the believer came once again to see Jesus, but this time he came not in the darkness, but in the light of day to help Joseph of Arimathea claim Jesus' body from the cross, prepare that body, and then bury it in a nearby tomb. When we are reborn, we live not in the darkness, but in the light. May we continue to be led by the light of the Holy Spirit here at the Church of the Ascension to a place of new life through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*