

“Born Again”

John 3:1-8

May 30, 2021

Film: *Begin Again*

To be “born again” is to begin again in your relationship with God. Some Christians hold up being “born again” as a litmus test of one’s faith. But Jesus isn’t handing out Golden Tickets to heaven. Rather, he is inviting us to be in intentional relationship with our Creator in the here and now. Hear what the Spirit is saying to us in John 3:1-8:

There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.”

Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”

“How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”

Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

“So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

There once was a young city boy who was very bored when school let out for the summer, even though his parents were both working from home. He couldn’t make any noise during the day, and the forced silence of his circumstances did not suit him well.

A friend invited the boy to go with him to his grandfather's dairy farm during the school break. Jumping at the chance to get away from the city and his boredom at home, he readily agreed and obtained permission to go from his parents, who were bored by his boredom and happy to offload him for a few months.

Knowing nothing about farms or farming, but believing he could shortcut any task handed him, the boy assumed he could accomplish all the daily chores assigned him in a matter of a few morning hours, leaving him the rest of the day for cooling off in a nearby swimming hole, napping in the barn loft, or playing video games in his room.

His friend offered to show him how to milk the cows, but the boy figured it was not hard to do and so, he refused any help. He was unsuccessful milking the cows, and again his friend offered to help. Full of pride and lying about his experience, the boy shooed his friend away. The daylight faded and still, the boy had no milk to show for his poor efforts. His friend found him frustrated and blaming the cows for their unwillingness to give him their milk. He was still unwilling to accept help and still unwilling to tell the truth about his lack of experience.

Dragging himself into bed some hours later, he vowed to leave the farm the next day rather than admit his failure. He was not about to begin again to complete the chore, labeling it *and* the cows, "stupid and impossible."

One of the farmhands had quietly observed the boy throughout the day. Though he was offered help numerous times, the boy turned down any instruction or assistance. When the boy left the barn for bed later that night utterly frustrated and angry, the farmhand quietly milked the cows and put them up for the night.

At breakfast, there was silence, a tension borne out of the previous day's problems. The boy was sullen and dismissive of everyone's attempts to get him to brighten up. His friend's grandfather finally put down his knife and fork, looked the young man in the eyes, and said, "Son, people who want milk shouldn't sit on a stool in the middle of a field in hopes that a cow will back up to them."

In *Begin Again*, this week's film, Dan Mulligan is a formerly successful record label executive living in New York City. He is estranged from his wife and teenage daughter and he is struggling to keep up with the changing music industry. After being fired from his job as a producer, he goes on a drinking binge which leads him to a bar in the Lower East Side. There he encounters Gretta James. Gretta is a young and fiercely independent songwriter who is suffering from the breakup of her love relationship. Captivated by Gretta's music, Dan offers to sign her to his former record label, and although she initially refuses, she reconsiders the offer and agrees. But the head of the record company dismisses her talent and so she and Dan set out on their own to make a live recording of her music on the streets of New York.

The innovative project is like a "born again" experience for everyone involved in its creation. Dan hasn't been able to recapture his magic for record producing by listening to demo recordings and waiting for talent to find him; there will be no milk found there. And Gretta cannot find her future or heal her broken heart by writing and singing songs only to herself.

The Pharisee, Nicodemus, asks Jesus a legitimate question: *Just what does it mean to be 'born again?'* A concrete thinker, Nicodemus is not capable of

processing in metaphor. For him, once a person has been physically born, they are not eligible to be born anew.

But Jesus has a different, more nuanced way of looking at life and life in relationship with God. For him, God-Alive—the Holy Spirit—adds to his relationship with the divine, leading him outside the strictures of law and religious fundamentalism. For Jesus, the Holy Spirit flings wide open the doors to the kingdom of heaven, values compassion and justice over righteousness and legalism. The kingdom of heaven is where all are welcome and love always wins.

When Jesus assures Nicodemus that it is possible to be reborn in the Spirit, he says to the man of laws and tradition that we must move beyond the words on the page into the territory of experience that is like ‘the wind-hovering-over-the-water.’ Spirit encourages us--*invites* us—to be free and independent of earthy concerns, to reach our arms and hearts to the heavens and thereby to surrender our need for control over our own lives.

That is what it means to be reborn in the Spirit. It doesn’t mean sitting out in the field and praying that the cow will back up to you for the milking; rather, it means milking all you can out of life to the glory and honor of Creator-God. It doesn’t mean drinking your way into oblivion like Dan because the stars have not aligned the way you deigned them to; rather, it means putting away the booze and the pills, the addictions to social media, gambling, pornography, compulsive spending or whatever else hooks you in unhealthy ways and surrendering instead your life to God’s holy will. (Thanks, Sr. Patrice)

Being reborn in the Spirit doesn’t mean concluding that you are unworthy when your relationship does not work out long-term or when your

talents are underappreciated in your work; rather, it means claiming your own gifts as we talked about last week—claiming your own gifts but finding ways to keep your humanity.

Jesus says:” When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch and becomes a living spirit.” This means, I think, that the Spirit of God is in us all from the moment we are born until we leave this earth. Our job as humans is to recognize it, tap into it, *learn to trust it*, and then act on what Spirit tells you.

This is a learned skill. I have worked diligently to refine it within my own life and having tapped into it, I have learned to follow its will. This has nothing to do, by the way, with the Reverend in front of my name. It has to do with a realization I accepted long ago that I needed Spirit’s help and direction and thereafter, my willingness to stop, listen, and follow Her call. In me, Spirit embodies the feminine, but Spirit is individual to everyone- you no doubt have your own vision of its essence.

In the past week, you may have wondered why I announced my retirement from parish ministry. Speculation follows wonder and closely related to speculation are the twin evils of gossip and rumor. So let me put some of these to rest:

- Chris and I love this church and this church family; no one or no unresolved issue is causing us to leave UCCPH. I am simply, retiring from church pastoring.
- I am not leaving to take another pulpit in another church, or to be a Conference-level minister somewhere. I won’t be doing pulpit supply preaching or interim ministry.

- I do have other interests in writing, teaching healthy boundaries, and consulting in ministry systems, and I will be continuing my work in these areas.
- I am in good health. I am not in burnout or in emotional distress. I feel quite grounded and sure about this decision because I am certain the Spirit is leading me in this direction.
- I will miss you and I wish only the best for you and for this church. We have done some beautiful things together over the last 8 ½ years and I see nothing but a bright future for UCCPH going forward. Over the next weeks, we will celebrate our ministry together as we engage in a healthy, mutual goodbye. I hope that you will take advantage of opportunities that will be offered to learn about healthy pastoral transitions and that you will engage in those healthy practices yourself. Some of those opportunities for goodbye will be on online and some will be in person. To the extent I am able timewise, I am also available to meet congregants individually or in small groups.
- Please engage in healthy communications practice. Free yourself from the scourge of rumor, gossip, and hearsay. If I can answer your questions, please let me do so directly. If I owe you an apology, let's not let unresolved hurts linger; please let me know. If you have an idea that contributes to a healthy goodbye, please let me or Eileen Enterline know, for she is your Pastor Parish Team connection.

The lesson is crystal clear for the frustrated and proud city boy sitting out in the pastureland, for the disenfranchised record producer and the despondent singer-songwriter, and for the law-bound Pharisee who is unsure how to unlock for himself the kingdom of heaven: We must all be the heroes of our own stories. The same goes for me. The same goes for this church.

Soon, you all will begin again. Soon, you all will re-gather in person. You will reimagine and redesign your online presence. You will welcome an interim minister and then a new settled pastor. You will decide the projects to be undertaken at the church site and you will need to discern how to pay for those projects. You will welcome new people and families to the church and say goodbye to others. It's the nature of church life. The Spirit will lead you in all things, I am certain. You will continue to be the heroes of your own unique church story. The church's spirit will be "born again"—post-Covid. It will not look the same as in February of 2020, that much is certain. With Spirit's help, it will be better!

Maya Angelou's words speak this message succinctly, "I believe the most important single thing, beyond discipline and creativity, is daring to dare." This is what Spirit empowers us to do. What do you dare to dare, UCCPH? Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church, and then...

May it Be So.