

Born Again Presbyterians?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Lent, March 11, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm going to say two words, and the moment I say these words I want you to see a face - to recall a face and a name - someone who comes to your mind when I say the words. Are you ready? The words are "born again". Born again. Do you see a face? I see a face.

I see the face of a high school senior, the oldest of six children. His father is a dairy farmer and his mother, a high-school English teacher. His family has worshiped in the same small central Pennsylvania town since the 1700s. His father and mother are elders. His grandfather was an elder for forty consecutive years, back when the only time you rotated off the session was when you died. Jamie was baptized as a child in that church and confirmed when he was in eighth grade.

But something happened to him his senior year. He went to a meeting with a friend where the preacher spoke with an open Bible in his hand from John 3:3, "You must be born again." "It doesn't make any difference how many generations your family have been church members. Baptism and going to church don't make you a Christian. Morality doesn't make you a Christian. You must be born again." Jamie trembled with fear and excitement. Had he been born again? He wanted to make sure. He responded to the altar call and his life really changed.

He began to read his Bible., to pray, and to have a new awareness of others. He wanted to talk to others in the church about the Bible but most didn't want to. He became discouraged and angry with his church. "Why don't you preach on new birth?" he angrily asked his minister. Church members began to feel uncomfortable around Jamie. They felt he didn't

believe they were really Christians.

When I hear the word "born again" I see Jamie's face. But I also see other faces. I see the face of a little baby girl with wispy, blond, curly hair. She's wearing a white lace baptismal gown and she's held by her father before a marble baptismal font. The minister takes the child in his arms, pours water on her head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and prays, "By the power of your Spirit, bless this water, that it may be a fountain of deliverance and rebirth. Wash away the sins of her who is cleansed by it. Raise her to new life, and graft her to the body of Christ. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon her, that she may have power to do your will, and continue forever in the risen life of Christ...."

Then the minister speaks to ^{the little girl} ~~Martha~~ who doesn't understand a word he says. "~~Martha~~, Just as your ~~re~~ parents gave you physical life, God's Spirit gives you a new birth through Jesus Christ. God loves you, even though you can't yet understand, believe or do anything to earn God's love."

When you hear the word "born again" does it also include the face of this little baby?

When I hear the words "born again" I see another face. I see the face of Bill, a thirty-five year old father of two girls. He's a high-school math teacher with a sharp analytical mind. He's a thinker and doesn't find it easy to express his feelings. In fact, most of the time, he doesn't even know what he's feeling. He hasn't been to church since he left home for college. The modern scientific world view just didn't seem to leave any room for religion.

But his daughters have started to go to Sunday School with friends. One daughter brings home from Sunday School a modern translation of the Bible and puts it down on top of the Sunday paper lieing on the coffee table. She

"always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming
their march on the way that was lit by the light;
often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet
following no other way."
T.S. Eliot, *The Rock*

runs upstairs to change her clothes and play. A little later Bill sits down in his easy chair to read the Sunday paper and sees the Bible. He picks it up, flips through the pages, comes to the Gospel of John and begins to read. He's fascinated. He continues to read throughout the afternoon. A whole new world opens before him and he wants to know more about it.

Next Sunday he comes to church, an ordinary Presbyterian church, and continues to come week after week. One Sunday, after the service, he asks the minister, matter of factly, without a touch of emotion in his voice, "How do I join this church?" "Well, we have new member classes." Bill attends the new members classes and is received into the church on profession of faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He feels uncomfortable talking about his religious experience but he's entered a whole new world and senses he has new life through Christ.

I see other faces when I hear the words "born again"; people who've grown up in the church, have never had a dramatic religious experience, yet trust in Christ and want to serve him... *and he has all kinds of questions & sometimes doubts*
are being renewed day by day through all the ups & downs of life.

Many of us, however, have identified being born again with a particular kind of religious experience that's foreign to what most of us have experienced. When you hear the words "born again" you see only the face of someone who you feel looks down on you as a poor, cold, formalistic, traditionalistic Presbyterian.

And yet Jesus says, "You must be born anew." We can't see or enter the Kingdom of heaven unless we've been born again. It's an absolute necessity for everyone, Jesus says. How does it happen? That's what Nicodemus asked. "How can these things be?" Jesus doesn't give a straight answer. Instead, he talks about the wind blowing. "The wind blows where it wills. You hear the sound of it but you don't know where it comes from or where

its going. So is every one who is born of the Spirit."

The new birth is the work of God's Spirit. The Spirit of God can't be controlled by us. "The wind blows where it wills" not where we will. Though we can't manipulate the Spirit, there are three ways that the new life of the Spirit is *ordinarily* communicated to us; through baptism, faith, and Holy Communion. These are the three ordinary ways. That's not to say, however, that God's Spirit can't communicate new life in other ways. The Holy Spirit can't be so tied to baptism that you can't be born anew without baptism. Nor does baptism guarantee the new birth the Spirit freely gives apart from a sincere faith in Christ. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters would emphasize baptism and holy communion as the primary ways God communicates the new life in Christ. Protestants emphasize faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. And yet both Roman Catholics and Protestants believe that baptism, faith, and Holy Communion are the ordinary ways God communicates the new life to us.

The important thing is not *when* or *how* the Spirit gave you new life. The important thing is that you have new life... that you trust in the God whom we know through the death and resurrection of Christ, the God who gives life to the dead.

If someone wants to know if you're a born again Christian, what will say? ^{say...} Don't be intimidated by people who try to make you feel that you're not really born again unless you share their kind of conversion experience. If you have a faith in Jesus Christ that works, you've been born again. If you can see the Kingdom of God in this world and have a desire to enter in and help to build it, you've been born again.

Breathe on me breath of God
Fill us with life anew,
That we may love what thou dost love,
And do what thou wouldst do. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Our God, how great you are! On the first day of the week we commemorate your creation of the world and all that is in it. Thank you for the light which wakes us morning by morning, and for that greater light which shines in Jesus Christ.

Our God, how great you are! On the first day of the week you raised Jesus from the dead. Raise us with him to a new quality of faith and life.

Our God, how great you are!. Again on the first day of the week you sent your Spirit on your disciples. Do not deprive us of your Spirit, but renew him in us day by day.

We thank you for how the wind of your Spirit is blowing throughout the world. We hear the sound of the wind of the Spirit in South Africa, Central America, Europe, Asia, North and South America. How surprising are the events that happen every day. We thank you for your promises in the bible to sprinkle the nations with clean water and give to us a new heart and mind and will. We thank you for your plan to bless all nations through the descendants of our father Abraham. We thank you that we can have assurance of your grace through Christ. Thank you for your gracious will to create new heavens and new earth.

Our nation
Our community + schools + businesses
Those who are sick, hospitalized,
recovers, Violet Kelley
Those who don't know Christ...
give them new life in Christ.

Mr. Teal

The

Kathy Kelley