

**Sermon for Sunday, March 12, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

You hear a knock at your door. You open it, and there stand two earnest young women.  
 “We won’t bother you long,” they say.  
 “We just want to ask you,  
 are you born again?”

You drive past a house. It looks a little run down: the paint is peeling on one wall,  
 and chickens scratch around in the dirt.  
 Not so long ago, it was out in the boondocks, surrounded by farmland,  
 but now it’s just a few hundred yards  
 from new residential developments  
 and looks kind of out of place.  
 And there, right on one side, is a large sign:  
 “John 3: 16. Have you been born again?”

A man stands in a pulpit, a black leather bound bible open in his left hand,  
 his right hand waving in the air.  
 “In the Bible, the very words of our Savior,  
 in John chapter 3, verse 16, it says,  
 ‘For God so loved the world  
 that he gave his only begotten Son,  
 that whosoever believeth in him  
 should not perish  
 but have everlasting life.’ Do you believe in him? Do you have eternal life? Have you  
 been born again?”

Have you been born again? It’s not a question  
 that we often hear in the Episcopal Church.  
 If you’re anything like me, you associate it with traveling evangelists,  
 or hardline conservative preachers  
 or simply people who don’t know how to mind their own business  
 where religion is concerned.  
 Many of us  
 are in the Episcopal Church  
 because however much  
     we might believe in God and Jesus,  
 we don’t believe in over simplifications,

or aggressive tactics and demands.  
Some of us  
might even describe ourselves  
as refugees from the brands of Christianity  
that constantly demand an answer,  
“Are you born again?”  
We’re not into that kind  
of in-your-face evangelism.

And so  
we try to steer clear of questions like this.  
We don’t make too much fuss about evangelism;  
we let people become part of our community  
without making them sign  
on the dotted line.  
It’s not that we don’t take our faith seriously;  
it’s just that we like to have our religion  
presented in a way  
that’s a little more refined,  
a little more nuanced,  
maybe even a little less demanding.

And so we avoid talking about being born again;  
we avoid asking people for their testimonies;  
we avoid anything that might be considered  
at all  
hard line.

Nicodemus  
would have made a great  
Episcopalian.

Nicodemus was a leader, one of the  
educated, the pious, the elite among the Jews.  
He’d heard about Jesus, even liked what he heard,  
but the idea of coming publicly to Jesus  
and asking him questions  
was impossible. It would destroy his reputation;  
it would undermine his credibility;  
it might even

threaten his livelihood.

So he came to see Jesus in the dark of the night.  
No one could see him; no one would suspect him.

He came to Jesus and said, “Rabbi,  
we know that you are a teacher  
who has come from God,  
because no one could do the miracles you do  
without the help of God.”

A nice straightforward  
greeting, honoring the visiting teacher.  
But what he really meant, what Jesus heard him say was,  
“Can I believe you?  
Is this really true?  
Do you have an inside track  
on how to get to eternal life?”

And that’s when Jesus began  
with this “born again” language.  
“No one can see the kingdom of God  
without being born again.”

And straightaway  
Nicodemus  
began to get confused.  
Because he knew, as well as we do, that being born  
is one of two events  
that by definition  
only happen once in a lifetime.  
The other one  
is dying.  
“But, but how can anyone be born again?  
It’s impossible!  
I’m full grown; my mother  
can hardly give birth to me  
a second time round!”

Jesus answered him,  
“No one can enter the kingdom of God  
without being born of water  
and of the spirit.”

And Nicodemus,  
not surprisingly,  
was still confused.  
Because Jesus's answer  
was not exactly clear about  
what this new birth was.  
"It's got to do with the Spirit,"  
he said,  
"a spirit that blows just like the wind.  
We hear it,  
but can't tell where it's coming from  
or where it's going,  
gusts that are unpredictable  
and blow us  
where we don't expect.  
We can see its effects  
but we can't control it.  
That's what the Spirit is like,  
that's what will shape our lives  
if we risk putting ourselves  
into the hands of God,  
if we risk allowing the spirit  
to blow through our lives,  
if we risk being  
born again.  
But the Spirit  
is not so unpredictable  
that it is dangerous,  
not really dangerous.  
Because this is all God's doing,  
God who loved the world so much  
that he gave his only son,  
so that whoever believes in him,  
whoever takes the risk  
to trust in that son  
will have  
eternal life."

Of course, this all sounded terribly risky.

Nicodemus was not stupid.  
Put his life into the control  
of something as unpredictable  
as the wind? Something as unprovable  
as God?

But Jesus went on. "I tell you," he said,  
"we are talking about the things of heaven,  
the things of God.  
And the only way to know  
if what I say is true,  
is to check it against the testimony  
of someone who has been to heaven,  
who has been with God.  
That's how you know.  
And the only one who has done that  
is the Son of Man. "

The Son of Man.  
It's a name that Nicodemus knew  
from his Old Testament reading,  
a name that as far as he can see,  
Jesus seemed to be qualified to use.  
So if Jesus was  
this Son of Man,  
if Jesus's words could be trusted,  
then what he was saying  
is that Nicodemus  
had to take the step  
of trusting himself  
to the power of the spirit  
trusting himself  
to the wind of God  
trusting himself  
to the power  
that can give him new birth.

The conversation ended there, and there is no indication  
of what Nicodemus thought about all this.  
But later in the gospel of John

we find him again hovering around in the background, not quite willing to commit himself,  
not ready to give up on it all.  
And when Jesus dies, it is Nicodemus  
who provided the spices  
to embalm  
his body.  
But we don't know  
if he ever took the risk  
and allowed the spirit of God  
to transform his life.  
It may be  
that he just stood on the edge,  
willing to listen  
but not quite willing  
to commit, not quite willing  
to allow himself  
to be born again by the spirit.

To be born again, born from above is another way scripture puts it.  
To allow ourselves to be given new life  
by God,  
to take seriously the promises of God  
and risk our lives on them.  
It's about being willing to undergo  
an experience  
that is as life changing  
as being born.  
A transformation as profound  
as that which turns us from being a foetus,  
a child fully dependent  
on our mother's body for life,  
to an independent human being  
capable of life in its own right.  
A transformation  
that takes us from the safety  
of a world that is clearly defined,  
a world with straightforward rules and boundaries  
to a world that is shaped by the Spirit, where the spirit of God  
runs free like the wind,

a world that is risky, unpredictable, full of challenge.  
But we move to this new world  
with the promise  
that God will be with us,  
that God is calling us,  
that God has something in store for us  
that is better than we could ever imagine.

Being born again  
is the sort of experience that Abraham has  
when on the basis of a promise of God  
he leaves his home, everything he knows, his family and friends and the life he has made  
for himself  
and sets off for the promised land.  
A risky journey  
and an uncertain end.  
But we know the end. We know  
that for Abraham  
the promise is fulfilled,  
and he ends up with everything God has promised him.  
A new land, a family full of descendants,  
and a God  
who is with him day by day.

We might not be real comfortable  
with the idea of being born again,  
or not, at least,  
with the way the question is too often put to us.  
But the question is one  
that is not limited to evangelists with big black bibles  
or signs by the roadside  
or people knocking at our doors.  
It's a question that Christ himself asks us,  
the basic question of faith,  
he asks  
gently, quietly, insistently,  
"Have you been born again? Are you willing to be born again? Just let me into your life,  
let my spirit give you new life, let me take you on a journey  
that will be beyond your wildest dreams and imaginings. Just trust me. Given me a  
chance."

Will you give Christ a chance?