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June 7, 2009

Born Again

John 3:3

I have a picture in my living room that might not look like much to you but for my husband Phillip and me, it is the first thing, outside of our children, we would try to save if there were ever a fire. This might surprise you for it is just a picture: some pen work and some watercolor paint. There are a few words the artist scrawled in different places and even a scrap of fabric that has been worked into the design. You would see a few buildings, oddly crooked, and a blue-grey sky. If you could see the artist's signature it would not be any name you know. It is just a painting that we have framed so it can hang in our living room. This is what it is. It is what you see.

What you cannot see from this picture's surface is that one of those oddly crooked buildings depicts our first home together as a married couple. You cannot know that our first home was in Edinburgh, Scotland, and so this image evokes for us not only that first year of our marriage but also that magical place where we were blessed enough to live. This picture is about our life together, Phillip's and mine. It is about all the hopes we had for our future then—that time when none of those hopes had yet come about and so they could still be anything. It is about the beauty, promise, and love God added to our lives when he gave us each other. This is what the picture means. It is what you *cannot* see.

What it *is* and what it *means* are not necessarily the same thing. At the very least, we could all agree that what it is does not encompass the breadth and depth of what the picture means. We cannot see the full extent of what this picture means. I have offered up one example from my own life of something that is one thing but means something different and more. We each have these objects in our lives.

I bring up this distinction between what something *is* and what it *means* because this is precisely what Jesus is trying to share with Nicodemus. Jesus is inviting him to experience the *meaning* of what he is seeing, rather than just its definition. For here is Nicodemus. He is a well respected religious leader so he knows the real deal when he sees Jesus at work. He sneaks over to see Jesus in the middle of the night to learn more about this new upstart. "I know you must come from God," he says to Jesus, "because nobody could do what you do unless they've come from God." He has seen Jesus' work and can state what it is. Jesus wants to take him further and help him not just know what his works are but experience what they mean.

Later Nicodemus again shows that he cannot deepen his understanding when Jesus starts speaking of seeing the kingdom of God. "You cannot see it," Jesus tells him, "until you are born from above." Nicodemus takes Jesus' words at their literal meaning—the Hebrew word for "being born from above" being the same as "being born anew" or "being born again." Because he can only see what something is and not what it means, Nicodemus offers a ludicrous response to Jesus' teaching. "How can I be born again?" he demands. "Do you know of some way I'm going to get back into my mother's stomach?" Nicodemus shows he is someone who knows what faith is but he still has not experienced what faith means for his life.

This idea of being “born again” has become quite a buzz phrase for our culture. It can even seem, at times, like there is a dividing line between those Christians who say they have been “born again” and those who want to run from any such talk! The “born agains” often claim that others are unfaithful and others can counter that “born agains” are fanatics. These debates and disagreements have slashed a dark scrawl across this scene in John and they can obscure what Jesus is showing us. He says that to see the kingdom of God, really see it, you have to be born from above. Just after Nicodemus’ bumbling response, Jesus continues and says, in essence, we are all made of flesh and bone and there is much in our lives that can be defined and seen in this manner. The picture is what it is. But we are not simply flesh and bone, Jesus says. Our lives have the capacity for the Spirit as well. And the Spirit cannot be defined as what is, *is*. It will blow where it wants to and take you along with it. You will not be able to pin it down but it will be able to change your life.

Jesus is saying that our faith life has been born again when our life straddles this world of flesh and bone and the world of the Spirit. When you read this Bible and it is no longer just a book but a gift from God that sustains your soul, then you have been born again. When you enter this building and know that it is wood and stone but that you can also meet Jesus here, then you have been born again. When someone cares for you in a moment and a way you never expected and you know that it was another’s kindness but it was also the Holy Spirit moving in your midst, then you have been born again. In these moments our eyes are opened and, even for just a moment we become greater than the flesh we are. We become born from above and we will see the kingdom of God, even if only a glimpse.

For Nicodemus, Jesus was a good person. He was even a man from God. Nicodemus might have even begun to believe Jesus was God’s Son. That was what it *was*. But Nicodemus had not experienced what all of that *meant*. He did not yet realize it was all about love. Jesus was God’s overflowed love that could no longer be held back. It was so great that it spilled into our world as the beloved Son—a gift to save us from ourselves. For we say we believe in the Trinity: in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But what does that mean? It means we believe that God has forever been in this active and eternal relationship within himself. This relationship is so filled with love and joy and grace that it could not be held within itself. Its love crashed into our world, “for God so loved this world,” Jesus tells Nicodemus, “that he gave his only Son so that all who know him would be whole and live forever.” Now *that’s* what it means. Amen.