

“Rebirth?”

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

February 18, 2018
Isaiah 53:1-3; Luke 2: 1-7;
John 3:1-10

Thinking back on Christmas is kind of a joyful thing. It’s not really what you would expect on the first Sunday of Lent, to think back on Christmas, the joy of a birth. I was thinking about that and I was thinking about how at a birth there is this incredible moment, a new life. I remember when I held my first child for the very first time. There was a little trepidation because I hadn’t really ever held infants very much and yet here she was. It was an incredible moment, thinking about it and wondering at what was happening.

It doesn’t take long to realize it’s more than just wonder. You begin to recognize that there’s a little responsibility involved. There are some things that have to be done. Some of them are less pleasant than others. There’s a reality that sets in and there is a realization that this is a longer-term event. You get past the initial moment and experience some of the responsibility. After Jesus was born, it was only within the first two years or so that they had to flee to Egypt.

As I think about watching a child start to grow up, as much as I told myself I should really treasure each moment, there were times when I thought, “I wonder how soon she will talk.” Then maybe it was, “How soon will she walk?” or “How soon before we can do other things together?” It was hard to not keep thinking toward the future and really appreciate what was happening in the present. I want to get to the end, in some ways.

I think about when they took Jesus to Anna and Simeon in the Temple, and they were overjoyed to see God’s gift to humankind, the Messiah. But they weren’t going to get to see what he would do. They weren’t going to see how he would rescue his people. It made me think about the idea that maybe God has a long-term view that sometimes I have a hard time understanding. I have a desire for things to be fixed immediately. I’d like to see them done.

Then we have these prophecies about Jesus. Many of them we read in the lead-up to Christmas to talk about the wonder of new birth. But then if you go a little further, you’ve got something like we read this morning from Isaiah that talks about a man despised and acquainted with suffering and sorrow. That just puts a little edge on it. What’s this about?

If that’s not enough, we have Jesus talking to Nicodemus about how the wind blows where it will and we need to be born or reborn of the Spirit. There’s something a little nebulous about that, and uncertain. Certainly Nicodemus was astonished. He essentially said, “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” There’s a way that this whole thing—of Jesus being born and then coming and asking us to be reborn—seems to be something about God coming into our lives. He comes as a baby, just as we do. He comes into our lives, into our world. Really, I was hoping for something a little more

dramatic. Sometimes I wish he were a fairy godmother and would just wave his wand and make everything right and good. The problem is that when I'm not thinking about him being the fairy godmother, I'm thinking that maybe I'm supposed to be Superman. I see the problems of the world and I want them all to change. I feel like I should be able to make them change, and yet it doesn't seem like I've been able to do that in too many ways.

Sometimes I wonder, as he offered those promises to Anna and Simeon, when they saw him, they knew that he had come to rescue his people and sometimes I feel like we're still waiting for that rescue.

So as we go into Lent, I wonder about what it means for him to come as a child, to come as a human being, to live among us, to offer us God's grace and to teach us—but not to wave a wand and change the world. It's feeling to me like he's inviting us into something rather than just making something happen. He's inviting us to participate.

It's interesting to me that when he's talking to Nicodemus, he says, "Why are you amazed?" (that "you" is singular) "You need to be born of the Spirit." (that "you is plural) As we go into Lent, oftentimes it's a time of reflection on how I am in relationship to God, what I need to do, and how my relationship should be. But here, he's talking about a people. Perhaps he's talking about us. Maybe it's not only a time for reflection on how we are doing with God as individuals, but how we are doing with God as a congregation, as a people of God. I think what he's doing is saying we can't do it on our own.

What he's done is enable us to move beyond our fear of failure, our sin. He's inviting us to recognize that God gives us grace and invites us into the kingdom, but into a place of being a people together. He doesn't say that any of us in particular will be the Body of Christ. He says the church will be the Body of Christ. The community is the Body of Christ.

Sometimes it feels a little bit like what I remember back in kindergarten when my teacher was teaching us to share and to cooperate. He's inviting us again to be a people of God—sons and daughters of God, together—and to make this life work, together. As I look at the world around us, what I realize is there are a lot of things I can't fix. I can't do it all on my own. Everything from school shootings to dysfunction of government to the divisions among us. It's something we've got to work on together. If we think about something like climate change, there's nothing I can do myself. It's something that we've got to do together. It feels like over and over I'm seeing that the Lord is inviting us to talk to one another and to work together, to be God's people, to open our hearts and our lives as a people to the movement of the Spirit, to be reborn together into the kingdom of God. And it's so hard to do.

One of the things we think about in Lent is letting go of something in our own lives, something that we hold onto. But in some ways it's an invitation to help us recognize how oftentimes our own lives can be self-serving. It's an invitation, rather, to be God-

...serving. It's an invitation to be serving God's people. And it's an invitation, then, to wade in to do it. It is as we do that, as we do that reflection, that we then can wade in and together be a people of God.

Each one of us has an incredibly important relationship with God. But there's some way in which being that people together—that he gathers us around a table, that he invites us to be the Body of Christ, that he invites us to be a family of faith, that he invites us to open our hearts and minds and souls again to that Spirit that moves wherever it wills—there's something about that that might lead us to know the fullness of God's grace.

Lent is a time that reminds us to think about where he might be guiding us and that possibly, possibly it might not seem easy. He went through being despised and suffering to show the fullness of God's grace, and maybe we may find that the way to the fullness of life is sometimes through that very suffering and affliction that he went through. Through it, we find the fullness of the grace God would give us, and find that he forms us into the Body of Christ, the people of God. And that, I believe, will change the world. Amen.