

Birth: The Way Home

From the Advent series: Home

Text: John 1:12-13; John 3:3

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In his poem, “For The Time Being,” W. H. Auden writes, “Nothing can save us that is possible. We who must die demand a miracle,” and so we do. The Advent theme of “Home” culminates today as we note that birth is the way home. And birth is a miracle. Birth is not a human possibility; it is the gift of God. Not this morning that we celebrate the literal birth of the Christ Child, but the birth that the Christ Child pointed to and made available to us: that birth from above, or being born again as it is popularly referred to. It is that birth and only that birth which is the way home. We’ve noted the yearning for home in the human heart. Last week we established the impossibility of home, the impossibility as a human possibility. But let me celebrate with you this morning the reality of spiritual birth—that new birth which is the gift of God. It is that miracle that we who must die demand, for nothing humanly possible can save us.

New birth – that’s the way that John describes it in the Christmas story that he tells, which is not with all the familiar accouterments of stars and angels and bright shining song, but rather in a cosmic eternal drama. In the prologue to his story of Jesus, he begins in the beginning, in fact before the beginning. He says, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Then he tells how that Word was in human history, in the history of that special people that God had called. But that Word, coming to his own, was not received. “He came to his own, but they received him not.” But there were a few, John tells us. Some received him and some believed, and to them he gave power to become the children of God. John is very clear that that is not a human possibility, for he stresses that those who believed in his name were born not of the blood or of the flesh, or of human will, but of God. For birth, the way home, is not a human possibility. It is God’s gift and it is all of grace.

In order to explicate the themes of his prologue, John tells us in the third chapter the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a respected leader in Israel, a rabbi, a great teacher. Nicodemus was curious about this one Jesus who had caused such a stir and to whom the common people listened gladly. He came to him by night to learn the secret of that spiritual reality, that world that seemed so foreign to

Nicodemus. Jesus said to him, “You must be born from above.” And Nicodemus, as the foil for this mysterious teaching, says “How can one enter a second time into his mother’s womb?” Jesus replies, “I’m not talking about literal physical birth. I am talking about that miracle that happens to one. That miracle that no one can manipulate and no one can force that is not at our disposal. I’m talking about that birth from above, where the breath or the wind of the Spirit of God blows where it wills. You see the effects of it, but you don’t know whence it comes or whither it goes; the mystery of the movement of God who has invaded our space and our time in the miracle of the Word become flesh, whose Spirit continues to riffle our hearts and create newness within us.” Nicodemus probably stands for the classical, institutional religion, that institutional religion which is so very valuable because it keeps the story alive and it continues in a community like this where the story is cared for and nurtured, and where the rituals are enacted, and where we baptize children, and take bread and cup. The institutional religion is so very important because the Spirit always needs form.

But Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus made it very clear that institutional religion and ritual and form such as we are all participating in is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end. And, the end in itself is new birth. It is a spiritual life. It is newness that is created that comes upon us silently, mysteriously; that new spiritual reality that opens up whole new worlds before us and brings us home wherever we are in whatever circumstance. When one has been born from above, one is birthed into a whole new reality and that is the end of Christmas. That is the end of incarnation. And that is the glad Good News that has come to the world in the birth of one who said, “You must be born again.”

To be born again. That phrase has entered into popular terminology in our day, hasn’t it? Wasn’t it Jimmy Carter who in his presidential campaign brought the term to common usage? I think perhaps it was, and since that time don’t I remember a cover on *Time Magazine* some years ago that talked about the “Born Again” phenomena. Since it has become so popular, everybody gets ‘born’d again’ now and again—athletes, celebrities; any kind of a peak experience is now referred to in common parlance as being ‘born again.’ Of course, when that happens it tends to drain such an ideal, or such a reality, of its deep spiritual meaning. Yet, maybe the very usage of the term is the way people at large get the idea that it dawns upon them that there is something more than just getting up in the morning and going to work and coming home and going to bed to get up in the morning . . . and all of the routine of our ordinary days where we can live such one-dimensional lives, unaware of rumors of angels and intimations of transcendence. Maybe the fact that being ‘born again’ has entered into common parlance is a sign that people are becoming aware, that there is another whole world and the possibility of newness into which one might be created.

Nicodemus, thank God, I think had the experience because if you read further on in John’s Gospel (after the crucifixion as a matter of fact), you’ll find that it was Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, that took down the body of Jesus

and embalmed it and put spices upon it and laid Jesus to rest—at some great risk, of course. We are told also by John that there were many of the leaders who believed in Jesus but secretly, daring not to say anything because they loved the honor of men rather than the glory of God. I think Nicodemus had the experience, and it wasn't something that was contrary to the ways of a great religious teacher in Israel, a great rabbi, but it was something more . . . more than just the institutional forms, more than just the thing in itself and the practice of religion. I think Nicodemus as an old man experienced new birth, and that's the wonderful possibility, and it's the promise of Christmas. And it's the promise for all of us as well in our day.

We live in a most exciting time. We live in an age of transition. When did it begin? I don't know exactly. When will something jell? I am not at all sure, but we're living in a hinge period. We are living in a fascinating time, and for some a very anxious time, because some of the old forms and structures have been shaken a bit. Some of the foundations are crumbling a bit. You see, a culture goes along on its way rather thoughtlessly and almost automatically for a long time, maybe centuries. Then the myths and the ideas and the common assumptions that are held by everyone lose their grip on the human imagination. People begin to think that perhaps there's something other, and perhaps it is that there are angels that hover about and send messages, perhaps in the intuition and the depths of the human being. Then old ways are questioned and institutions begin to falter, and the guardians of the law, and the guardians of the old tradition hang on with desperate clutching fear, trying to buoy up structures that no longer will carry the freight. We live in such a time as that.

There are a lot of people that are afraid and are anxious. You always at times like that hear the cry that we ought to go back to a former day. Nostalgia fills the air as though there really were "good old days." If we really describe the "good old days" we would find that we've moved a long way beyond those "good old days," those common assumptions that everyone took for granted. We live in a day when there are many people and whole nations, and whole groups of people that are coming to consciousness and to self-awareness and are saying, "We too are human. Look at us. Give us our day, our 'place in the sun.'" We live in a day that is full of the rising of expectation and of dreams and desires. We live in a time when the old ways simply won't do it any more. It's a time of transition. It's a fascinating time.

The cover story in *Newsweek Magazine*, November 28, 1994, "The Search For The Sacred," gives accounts of all kinds of people who are searching for something that, perhaps without their knowing it, has been born from above. A spirit has taken hold of them and they are simply not satisfied any more to live in that old way, some of them very successful in the old way of the world, the commonly accepted way. Some of them are getting 'off the trolley' as it were and simply saying, "There must be more." They must have had a sense of angels and intimations of eternity coming to birth in their heart. Some of them are seeking

that spiritual reality in the most bizarre fashion. But we live in a day in which there is a widespread and general spiritual awakening.

I want to say that very clearly because we hear so much of the opposite. We hear so much that denigrates our present day, that there is so much wrong with our world, and that society is so filled with ills and all of that negative talk. God knows there are enough problems to deal with in the social structure of our society and our world, but I believe that Christ has come and light has come, and the yeast of the Spirit is continuing to permeate the history of humankind. And I believe that we live in one of the most fascinating times that it has ever been possible for anyone to live. We live in a time where spiritual openness and curiosity and sensitivity have emerged, such as have never been known before. I do believe that. When you have a news magazine covering this spiritual quest of a multitude of people in great diversity, then you know that there is something afoot in the world. There is so much in the dreams of humankind spoken by the poets in great beauty with all kinds of images that the world has never yet realized. Will we always simply live with dreams and never come to reality? Or will those dreams, will the poets finally get through to the marrow of our bones? Will this world be transformed one day? Oh, not in a superficial optimism, but look about you. Recognize that you have brothers and sisters around this world who are not satisfied any longer to live in a closed world, one story with no angels, no transcendence, no love at the core of things, no beating of the heart to the needs of the other, those who would simply dominate rather than build community.

We live in a fascinating day. There are great possibilities in our day as we stand at the edge of the future, the third millennium, a time that seems to bring out the fear and anxiety of people, but rather ought to be for us an invitation to invite the newness that is created by the eternal Spirit of God. Home is through birth. It is not a human possibility. But, by God, it happens here and there, and it is happening, and I believe it will happen in widespread fashion as the millennium comes around. It's a wonderful time in which to be alive.

For example, I think there are people all over in different religious traditions who are beginning to wake up to one another. We live in a decade that is on the edge of the third millennium. I do believe that the next millennium will be not a millennium of religious absolutism, but of a pluralism that is open to the other, where we share the spiritual riches and the endowments that we have all received, where together we grow into a greater understanding of the reality of life and the depths of love. This is a world in which a statesman such as Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia calls on world leaders to wake up to the spiritual reality and to build a global world community, which is obviously necessary. This is a day in which to come alive to the riches of our own tradition, to be ready to share them, and to be ready as well to receive the riches of others – rather than closing ourselves off, opening ourselves up to the reality of spirituality that is being

created by the one true God who has come to us, sharp focused in the face of Jesus Christ.

Or, if you want to go into another area, the area of the sciences. If you would trace as you've heard me say many times, the history of the science of physics, you would find that, in the wake of new physical theory, there has always been a breakthrough in theological understanding. It was in the rise of the Age of Reason, the Modern Age, the Enlightenment, with Newtonian physics that we've got this closed cause and effect universe. And rationalism dominated the scene. The human mind was the measure of truth and reality. Then along comes an Einstein with his Theory of Relativity that I don't understand, but which I know really threw a wrench into the Newtonian machine that had so neatly described reality. Then, of course, building on Einstein was Niels Bohr, the Scandinavian, the Danish physicist, who comes up with Quantum Theory. He and Einstein were friends but toward the end of their life they couldn't communicate any more because Einstein couldn't quite go along with the indeterminacy, the unpredictability, the randomness, the mystery of this physical universe. Einstein said of God, "The Old Man doesn't play dice." Bohr said, "Oh yes, the Old Man does. This world is filled with more potential, more infinite possibility than any predictability on the part of anyone who has yet thought about these things." Then if you read the implications of Quantum physics you know about the possibility of parallel universes. We hear of black holes and no one knows what black holes are, but what if you could go through a black hole and find yourself in another whole universe through a time warp, in another whole age, in another whole reality? You think that's poppy cock?

It's the stuff of science fiction and the stuff of science fiction usually is the prelude to what everybody knows in another century or two. There will be a day when our enlightenment thought, our heavy rationalism, our bowing down to the God of human reason will look so shoddy and so shabby, we'll laugh at our silly smallness in the light of the infinity of the universe that has been created by the Eternal God who can never be defined and will never be brought into a corner. This God who creates and continues to create in an expanding universe whose deepest minds, probing it, stand in wonder of it all. There is more wonder and awe in the natural sciences today than in those of us who are people of the Book, who know it all, have it all wrapped, all sealed up, and have the definitions down pat.

No, home is a way of birth. Home comes by opening oneself up to a miracle. It comes silently. It comes unpredictably. It comes without being able to demand it. It comes . . . and when it comes . . . and when it has happened . . . one says, "Oh, my God! I never would have thought . . ." and then all of our hopes and dreams and all of our creeds and scientific propositions are like child's play in the face of the reality that breaks through and comes within our grasp. Ah! It's a fascinating time in which to be the people of God. It's a fascinating time to acknowledge the

possibility of new birth, of being born from beyond ourselves, of being born into newness such as we've never yet dreamed of.

I want to interrupt this sermon with a commercial. I want to tell you that you have a Team whose quartet of voices are ready to lead you into the newness and the excitement that lies beyond the horizon. You have in Colette one whose faith formation will tell the children the "Old, Old Stories" with question and wonder and awe, so that the children we baptize will know the stories that have shaped us. Then you have, in our young friend Bob, one who will care for you and also challenge you and lead you into social engagement in order that the world of which the prophets dreamed where lion and lamb will lie down together, where they would beat swords into plow shares and spears into pruning hooks, where they would learn war no more, where they would not hurt nor destroy in all God's holy mountain not because of an enforced Roman peace, but because of justice and equity and compassion and community – you have in young Bob Kleinheksel one who will lead you to the edge and push you over. And if you are hungry, if you are looking for something more, if you would see a rift in the heavens, if you would be born again, come to Peter who will lead you with prayer and meditation, and a cultivation of a spirituality which is the wave of the future where we are all going. And I . . . I hope, simply, to skid into the next millennium on their coattails.

This is a wonderful day in which to be alive. Nothing can save us that is possible. We who must die demand a miracle. And the miracle has happened. It happens and one breathes deeply and everything so familiar and known and ordinary is transformed with a radiance that shines out of the depths of eternity. The light has come for those who have eyes to see it. The Word has been enfleshed in those who would touch it . . . for just a moment.

For just a moment let's have the lights dimmed. The evangelical church has missed the point so often because it has said that if you would believe, or if you would assent to this, or if you would have faith you would be born again. It's backwards. Being born again is not a human possibility. It is not the end of some human effort. It is not the will of the flesh or human will. It is of God. But in just a moment or two, be open to the miracle. Just breathe deeply, for who knows, there could be in this moment the intersection of eternity with time, and the likes of us might be born from above.