

LIKE THE WIND

“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Thus sayeth Jesus.

Born again? What exactly does that mean? To be born again? Some people believe being born again is a dramatic, sensational event. They say the Spirit hits you so abruptly that in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, you’re changed. Transformed. You’re not the same person you were a moment ago.

Years ago I talked with a man who believed in this kind of born again event. Indeed, he said it happened to him. He said you had to be “slain by the Spirit.” When I asked what he meant by that, he shared his own experience. He belonged to a Pentecostal church. He started attending when he was a young boy. His parents, who were very devout, took him to church when he was six or seven. They were worried about his soul, and his eternal salvation.

At first he didn’t mind attending services, but when he became a teenager he started to resist his parents. He wanted to be able to sleep in on Sunday mornings and play with his friends whose religious requirements weren’t as strict and unyielding as his were.

One Sunday morning, he actually hid from his parents so he didn’t have to go to church. They searched for him around the house for half-an-hour, until they finally had to give up and leave so they wouldn’t be late for worship. When they returned home they expressed to him just how unhappy they were with him. He said his bottom was so sore from his spanking, he couldn’t sit down for hours afterwards.

One day, the man said, I went to church and there was a guest preacher. Someone who came up from Georgia, and specialized in born again experiences. At the end of a very long and loud sermon, he had an altar call. Anyone who wished to (but actually everyone was expected to) could come forward and be prayed over by this preacher. The boy didn’t want to, but his parents insisted. So he got in line, and when it was his turn two ushers held on to him tightly, one on

each arm. It was a precaution, one of the ushers said, for when the Holy Spirit came into him.

The preacher told him to close his eyes, and he did. Then he felt this hand pressing down against his forehead, and the preacher began to pray for the Holy Spirit to come into him with power and authority. He was literally screaming, demanding that the Holy Spirit come. “Suddenly,” the man said, “down I went. I fell over backwards, filled with the Spirit. If the ushers hadn’t been holding on to me I would have fallen on the floor. It was like I was hit by lightning. I felt like a power line, and God’s power was running through me like electricity.”

“That,” said the man, “is what I mean by being slain by the Spirit.”

When he asked me if I had been born again, I told him I’d never had an experience like he had. “My new birth,” I said, “is still in progress. “ By the way, it’s still in progress. And I don’t expect to be fully born in the Spirit until I’m dead in my mortal body.

I certainly don’t deny that the man I’d talked to had some kind of spiritual experience. And yes, you could say that he had been slain by the Spirit and born again when he was a teenager. What happened in church that day certainly changed him. But I don’t believe all born again experiences are the same. Maybe or some people to come to the Lord, they need a charismatic preacher who prays over them until they fall backwards in some ecstatic moment that totally overwhelms them. But for other people, the Holy Spirit might make itself known in a less dramatic way. God, you see, can’t be confined or limited to fit our own personal perceptions, preferences and beliefs.

The Spirit, said Jesus, is like the wind. Unseen and unpredictable. “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” The Spirit of God can’t be restrained or controlled or inhibited. Because Spirit is as free as the wind. Sometimes the wind blows through like a hurricane, knocking down everything in its path. Call it being “slain by the Spirit.” But other times the wind is a gentle breeze. You don’t even hardly know it’s there, except for the rustling of the leaves that it causes.

I was reading a book called *Front Porch Tales* by Philip Gulley. *Front Porch Tales*, is a collection of (from the front cover) “warm-hearted stories of family, faith, laughter and love.” I want to read a story to you from this book, called “Streams in the Desert.” Because it describes another kind of born again experience—one that, personally, I’m more familiar with and much more comfortable with.

Went over to my folks’ house one spring day to celebrate my nephew’s first

birthday. Took a walk and saw people out working in their yards, folks I hadn't seen for years. I saw Mr. Amos Welty down on the corner, raking up the winter deadfall from his yard. Getting the place ready for six months of flowers, starting with the crocuses and ending with the mums. I stopped to look at them. He came over to talk, which made me nervous, since we had parted as enemies twenty years before.

Mr. Welty had been a sour man, a mean man, truth be told. Once, he even threw a shovel at me for walking on his grass. I upped the ante the next day by nailing him with a water balloon. He was pulling weeds, stood to stretch, and I caught him amidships—POW!

He called the town police officer, Charlie Morelock, who put out an all-points bulletin on me. Officer Morelock found me in my front yard. He stopped his cruiser, climbed out, and walked toward me with his hand on his gun. He drew near, reached out, laid his heavy hand on my shoulder, looked me in the eye, and said, "Good shot." He didn't like Mr. Welty either.

So I hadn't talked to Mr. Welty since that time, but it was on my mind when he walked toward me that early spring day. He extended his hand and we shook, which disarmed me. Then we talked about the crocuses and other harbingers of spring. Twenty years ago, he was corroded with anger; now he was gentleness personified. He had changed. Amos Welty had metamorphosed. I talked with my dad about it.

He said Mr. Welty had been nice ever since his mother died. She was all he had, then she died and he was alone. It occurred to him that instead of throwing shovels at children, he should invite them to his porch for bubblegum and cookies. Now his yard had bare spots where the grass once grew. It seemed a far lovelier place.

I read a book that said one's personality and character are pretty well formed by the age of five. By then folks can tell whether someone will be sipping Ripple in an alleyway or inventing a cure for cancer. At least that's what the author of this book said. Get it right in the first five years or start saving for bail money.

I pitched the book. First, because I didn't need the pressure. I have two children and a spastic colon, so I already don't sleep nights. But I also pitched the book because I know too many Mr. Weltys—folks who changed horses midway across life's stream. They got tired of the nag of hate they were riding and traded up to charity and grace.

The prophet Isaiah talks about God making streams in the desert. He talks about

how God puts things where they've never been before, like love where hate once reigned. Streams in the desert, Isaiah calls it. I'm here to tell you these streams are real, for early one spring, when the crocuses bloomed, I waded into one.

"Very truly I tell you," said Jesus, "no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again." In some ways, that almost sounds like a threat. "Get right with God! Get born again, or you won't see the Kingdom of God. You'll be locked out of heaven forever. Those who hear those words as a threat might be so frightened that they seek out a preacher who will pray over them and knock them over with a "slain by the Spirit" experience. And that's fine. That's one kind of born again experience.

But I hear those words as a promise. "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again." And God wants you to see the Kingdom. God yearns for you to be a citizen of the kingdom, where charity and love, grace and mercy are the ways of life. Because, remember, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

So, yes, Jesus said we must be born again to see the Kingdom of God. And the urgency I hear in that statement is, "Listen to me. It's time for a transformation. Because God doesn't want you to miss out on the new and glorious life he has in mind for you. God loves you too much to let his gift of Eternal Life pass by you. But before that can happen, you must be born again."

I'm sure God understands that sometimes, being born again takes time. Just like regular birth does. Before we're born into this world we need nine months of gestation in the womb—give or take—then our new life in the world can begin.

I think the same thing can be true about being born again by the Holy Spirit. Because, you can't rush being born. And sometimes you can't rush being born again. Yes, it can happen in a moment. One can be born again in a dramatic, instantaneous transformative experience. But sometimes it might take longer. Maybe a lot longer. Years, or even a lifetime. Which is but a moment of time for the Holy Spirit.

So, I pray for a new birth in the Spirit for all of you this Lent. How and when that will happen—well, as Bob Dylan once said, "The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind." And like the wind, God's Spirit blows where ever it pleases. Amen.