

Sermon for Sunday, January 22, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"BORN AGAIN"

Text: "Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.'" St. John 3:3

This morning I want to share with you on how to be born again. What I will be saying this morning is not anything new or that I probably haven't said before. However, two things have prompted me to address myself to this subject this morning.

First, I had a memorial service last week for a long-time member of this congregation. In that memorial service I tried to share what being a Christian was all about.

Later in the week I got a note from a member of the family which said, "Several persons that were present told me that they didn't really know what Jesus was all about... you made it so clear and concise." That got me to thinking that there really are

a lot of people in the world who have never really heard--or at least understood--the good news about Jesus. I think many of us have heard the gospel from time to time, but it wasn't meaningful to us at the moment or else we really didn't understand what it was all about. Sometimes we have a heart to hear God--maybe a death of a friend or loved one, maybe some tragedy in our lives, some sorrow or trouble or loneliness--that opens our hearts to hear what God has to say to us and when we hear about Jesus under those circumstances, suddenly it makes sense to us.

The second thing that happened last week was also related to a letter that came to me. This particular letter was from a long-time member of our church. The writer explained how he had never really been through a course or training to learn what it really meant to be a Christian. The note ended with the request to share with him how to be born again. That note has been on my heart ever since it came. It was then that I realized how important it is that from this pulpit the people who come hear again and again the good news about Jesus. Many of us know that story already. I have preached it many times. Yet, for whatever reason there are still people who either did not have a heart to hear God before, or else truly did not understand it. For that reason, this morning I want to explain as simply as I know how what the Christian faith and Jesus are all about. Those who have never heard the story need to hear it and those of us who have, never tire of hearing it. Our opening hymn this morning was entitled, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine!" My prayer this morning is that not a single person will leave here this morning without having that blessed assurance in his own heart. And then our second hymn was "Sing Them Over Again to Me". And who of us who has made the wonderful discovery of a born again life can ever tire of hearing that marvelous story told again and again.

The Bible tells us in the beginning how God created all things. When you stand on the seashore and listen to the surf as you gaze out across the horizon; as you walk through a forest and listen to the sound of the wind through the trees; as you stand and look upon the majesty of the mountains; you are looking at the work of God, for he made all things and the Bible adds, "and that it was very good." But, as the crowning act of creation, God made you and me--he made man. Of all the creatures that God made, you and I were different for the Bible tells us that God made man in his own image. That means that we alone had a capacity for God. We alone had the capacity to have fellowship with God for he made us to love us and for us to love him in return.

But how could a man show his love for God? In order to respond with a loving "yes" to God, man must also be free to respond in unlove, in rebellion with a "no" to God. And so it was that God gave man freedom--true freedom to say "yes" or to say "no" to him. That was the terrible risk God ran. I suppose he could have programmed us to say "yes"; I suppose he could have made our loving response of "yes" instinctive. But God didn't want love from a robot or instinctive love that couldn't help itself. No, God wanted real love from you and me that came from the heart and he gave us the freedom--the awful freedom--to say "yes" or to say "no."

The Bible tells us that from the very beginning man used his freedom to say "no" to God, to respond in unlove, rebellion, and disobedience. And isn't it true that you and I still find ourselves saying "no" to God? As a consequence from man's rebellion, his relationship to God was broken. As it turned out, man apart from God doesn't work very well. That brokenness entered every area of man's life. Our lives can be categorized under four major areas. First is our social life--our relations to others. When man disobeyed God, brokenness entered into man's relationships with other men and the Bible tells us that one of the first things to happen was that a brother killed a brother. We have lived to see across that world the consequences of this brokenness in man's relationships for we see wars and cruelty and six million Jews burned in gas ovens. In our own lives we know what it is to have brokenness, even with those we love the most. The second area of our lives is the physical area. And there too we have seen our own brokenness for we are subject to pain and sickness; we see our bodies grown old, wear out; our arteries get clogged with age, they break and we die. So disease and sickness, pain and death are a part of the consequence of our brokenness. Genetic malfunctions, birth defects, all are a part of what happened to us when we said "no" to God.

The third area of our lives is the emotional/mental part. The Bible tells us that man saw he was naked and he was afraid. So fear and anxiety entered his emotional/mental life. You and I know what it is to experience depression and anxiety and despair. We know what it is to be handicapped by our own inner emotional life, to see how needs and drives can cause men to do dreadful and shameful things. But the fourth area of our lives which experienced brokenness was the spiritual part. The one thing that distinguished us from the rest of God's creation, was our capacity for him. Now, man was cut off from the very source of his being. Man's heart is still restless until it rests in God, but in his broken restlessness, man worships all kinds of wrong things.

So it was that man, the crown of God's creation, the object of his love, experienced brokenness in every area of his life--total devastation. If the story ended there, it would be a tragic story indeed. But the Bible tells us that though we responded in unlove to God and turned our backs on him, God never stopped loving us. From the beginning he began to find a way to restore us to fellowship with him, to make us at one with him again.

How would God do that? How would he heal the brokenness and draw man back to him again? How would you do it? If someone broke a law or a rule how would you pay for the penalty and wipe out his prison record? The Bible says that God did an incredible thing. God reached down into human history and chose for himself a people. He was to teach them about his forgiveness and his love, he was to share with them how he wanted his people to live. That people were then to be God's messengers to the world, to tell them of his love and his forgiveness, to tell men how to live a new life.

Had you chosen a people to do that for you, whom would you have chosen? Would you have chosen a great and noble race that might produce a Plato or an Aristotle? Would you have chosen a mighty nation with a great Caesar that could bring the world to its feet? But God reached down into human history and created for himself a people who were no people; a people who were slaves in Egypt, languishing in servitude and captivity. And God said, "I shall be your God and you shall be my people." Thus God chose the Hebrews and made for himself a holy nation. He brought them out of bondage and brought them to a land of promise.

But it is hard to be God's people. Our brokenness gets in the way. So the Jews found it so hard to do God's will, to be what he wanted them to be, to live as he wanted them to live, and they found it so terribly difficult to tell the world of God's love. So, at last, through those people God sent his own Son to this earth.

He came in human form and he told us about God, how he loved us and wanted to forgive us; he told us how God wanted to heal our brokenness and to make us whole again. He told us it was like being born all over again, but if we wanted to be what God intended for us to be, we had to be born again.

Then, as the story goes on, that the Son of God went to the cross and there he died. He was God's son and he didn't have to die. He had done no wrong for his was a sinless life and he didn't deserve to perish. Yet, the Bible tells us that he willingly went to that cross and there he took my place--your place--and he died for us.

Then, the Bible tells us a wonderful thing. The Bible tells us that if we will accept his death in our place, God will count our debt, our rebellion, our sin, our brokenness paid for and forgiven. Yes, Jesus substituted himself for us and if we will accept it, we are forgiven and restored to God.

But even when we are forgiven, we still suffer our brokenness. We still are subject to brokenness in every area of our lives. So, Jesus said to us, "I know. But there are two things I want to tell you. First, when you die then my Father will take you to himself and he will restore you completely and perfectly. But second, in the meantime, God wants you to live for him. I know you can't do that because of your brokenness, but to help you, my Father and I are going to put the Holy Spirit in your hearts. As long as you give your heart to us, as long as you surrender your will to the Holy Spirit, we will live in your heart and help you live as God wants you to live."

So, from beginning to end the Bible is a single story, the story of how God made us, how he lost us, and how he bought us back again. You say, "O that is a wonderful story. But tell me, how can I be born again? How can I be forgiven and restored to fellowship with God? How can I live a new life in the Spirit?"

Well, the answer is very simple. First, you must admit that you are lost. You must confess your brokenness and cry out to God, "Lord, be merciful to me as a sinner. Second, you must tell God that you believe in Jesus as his Son and that you accept his death on the cross as done in your place. Third, you must confess that you know you cannot save yourself. You must confess that you are unable to live a worthy life or a holy life. A lot of people think they are not good enough to be saved. They want to wait until they are living better lives, or have cleaned up some of the trash in their lives, and when they are good enough, they will ask God to save them. Friends, that will never work. You can never be good enough. Praise God, he came to save sinners. So in confessing that we can't save ourselves, we give our sin to him. We give our lusts, our greediness, our selfishness, our evil thoughts--everything--to him. Then, fourth, we ask God to put the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We ask him to give us that inner spiritual power to begin to live new lives for Jesus. And when we do all of that--and really mean it--something wonderful begins to happen in our lives. He changes our desires, he changes our habits, he changes our attitudes, he changes our hearts. We begin to experience joy and love and patience and all of the fruit of the Spirit. We begin to know that peace that passes understanding.

Have you had that experience in your life? Have you confessed your need of God? Have you asked him to forgive you because of Jesus? Have you asked him to fill you with his Holy Spirit? If you have, you have been born again. If you have not, why don't you do it right now? It does mean surrender. It does mean giving your will, your heart, to his control. And yes, it will make a lot of differences in your life. But the only way you can ever be what God wants you to be is to surrender to him.

We are going to pray. There are some of you here who made that commitment, but you have drifted away. You have let things come between you and God. I invite you to pray, too. Others of you have made that commitment but want to be sure of your faith and your salvation. You pray with us, too. And for those of you who have never prayed that prayer, I want to ask you if you are ready--are you ready to give your heart to Jesus, are you ready to surrender your life to God--are you ready to be born again? Let us pray: Lord, I confess my sins, my brokenness. (If there are some specific sins you need to confess, in a moment of quietness, confess them to God in your heart); I believe Jesus is your Son. I believe he died for my sins that I might be forgiven. Father, I accept Jesus as my Saviour-- I believe his death was for me. Thank you for forgiving me, even when I don't deserve it. And now, Lord, send your Holy Spirit into my heart. Fill me with your power. Help me now to live for you. I surrender my will to you and to the power of the Holy Spirit. And now, Lord, I thank you for saving me. I claim the promise of Jesus that if I open the door of my heart, he will come in. Amen.

Did you pray that prayer? What did you expect to happen? Maybe you felt God's Spirit, or maybe you didn't. Did anything happen if you didn't feel it? Yes, because our salvation is not based on what we feel, but it is based on the trustworthiness of God. And the Bible promises that if we receive Jesus, we have eternal life. The Bible promises that if we invite Jesus in, he will indeed come in. So, if you prayed that prayer, you are born again--not because of what you did or didn't feel, but because of the promise of God. Go, now, begin to live out your new life. Love God, serve him, obey him. You are a child of God and you have eternal life. Next Sunday I will share with you some things to do to help you now that you have been born again.

So, from beginning to end the Bible is a simple story. It tells us how God made us, how he loved us, and how we brought sin back again. Now we have a wonderful story. But tell me, how can I be forgiven and restored to fellowship with God? How can I live a new life in the Spirit?

Well, the answer is very simple. First, you must admit that you are lost. You must confess your brokenness and try out for God. Don't be worried to be as a sinner. Second, you must tell God that you believe in Jesus as his Son and that you accept his death on the cross as your sin. Third, you must confess that you know you cannot save yourself. You need someone that you are unable to live a worthy life or a holy life. A lot of people think they are good enough to be saved. They want to wait until they are living better lives, or have cleaned up some of the mess in their lives, before they will ask God to save them. But I believe that will never work. You can never be good enough. Thanks God, he came to save sinners. So in confessing that we can't save ourselves, we give our sin to him. We give our hearts, our righteousness, our evil thoughts--everything--to him. Then, fourth, we ask God to put the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We ask him to give us that inner spiritual power to begin to live new lives for Jesus. And when we do all of that--and really mean it--something wonderful begins to happen in our lives. He changes our hearts, he changes our attitudes, he changes our hearts. We begin to experience joy and love and peace. It's all of the fruit of the Spirit. He begins to know that peace that passes understanding.

Now you had that experience in your life. Have you confessed your heart to God? Have you asked him to forgive you because of Jesus? Have you asked him to fill you with his Holy Spirit? If you have, you have been born again. If you have not, why don't you do it right now? It does seem surprising. It does seem giving your will, your heart, to his control. And yet, it will make a lot of differences in your life. But the only way you can ever be what God wants you to be is to surrender to him.