The New You: Being Born Again

Isaiah 43:18-19; John 3:1-5

Our second reading comes from John 3. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus[a] by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” **3** Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again[b] he cannot see the kingdom of God.” **4** Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” **5** Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

I’m just curious, how many of you know this text from growing up Evangelical or from having someone tell you that you needed to be saved when you were younger? We are such a

Catholic culture that it is possible to have lived without hearing the plan of salvation, the Four Spiritual Laws: God loves you, Humans are sinful and separated from God, Jesus Christ is God's only provision to save us, and we must individually accept Jesus as our savior.

In Little Rock, Arkansas, at a very mature age of 6 or 7, I walked the aisle in my Baptist Church and signed up. I knew I was in trouble. I had a mouth, even then. But I never found this formula convincing. We had a "New Christians" class that I got kicked out of for being a smart-ass. I asked the question, "I've accepted Jesus as my savior; what about the rest of my life?" I wasn't actually being a smart-ass, and I never did get an adequate answer to my question in the Evangelical church where our only mandate was to share the gospel with people who haven't heard the good news.

As a child, I thought the plan of salvation was way too much and not nearly enough either. The more I read the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the more questions I had about this whole spiritual approach. Jesus never asks us to commit ourselves to him or his plan for salvation. Jesus is more profound than that, and he asks us to commit ourselves to many things at many different times in our lives.

These days, now that I'm further along in life, I've returned to reading Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, and Viktor Frankl. All of them describe how we evolve emotionally and spiritually throughout our lives. So, we do have to be born again. In fact, we may be born again several times if we are lucky enough to live long enough and profoundly enough. We are in a long process of "becoming ourselves," which is the point of the life cycle, as Christians might say, that we manifest our full stature as 'children' not of this world,

not what other people tell us we are, but our full stature in God, our best selves, our fullest selves.

And we would understand it better if we could translate the Sermon on the Mount from the Aramaic Jesus spoke, not the much more sophisticated Greek the earliest Christians translated it into. Greek is a much more sophisticated language, much, much more precise. Aramaic is one of the simpler languages on earth, the language of shepherds and farmers. In Greek, you can say something 12 different ways, each with a specific nuance. In Aramaic, one word covers 8 meanings, and context tells you which one.

So in the Sermon on the Mount, we read, “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Professor Neil Douglass-Klotz points out that the word ‘blessed’ is a very specific Greek word, but the original Aramaic describes a state of being full

of life.[i] Often, Jesus says a phrase like, “In the fullness of time”, literally when you are pregnant and about to give birth or when the harvest is ripe and ready to be picked. Spiritually, you are pregnant with meaning. You get it. Psychologists today use the phrase “flourishing”. So a better translation would be “You are spiritually flourishing (or thriving or growing in the right direction) when you are ' poor in spirit.”

“Poor in spirit” isn't very accurate for us English speakers, either. It sounds like we don’t have much, like a simple notice that “the least of these” also count, as Jesus says elsewhere. Except here, being ‘poor in spirit’ is something we actively do. We empty ourselves. It is not a lack of drive, talent, or ego.

The meaning is that we actively create positive inner space in our lives, in meditation, prayer, and retreat (as Jesus often did), to be alone and reflect on the bigger picture of our lives. We actively

shut off technology. We stop listening to the world's negative noise. We stop listening to the well-meaning people trying to advise us on how to live our lives. No, we are cultivating internal space to be with ourselves, reflect, get rid of all these outside voices, and listen to ourselves, which is listening to God.

"For theirs is the kingdom of Heaven," which is also deceptive to us English speakers because we are conditioned to think of Heaven as something otherworldly, something out there in the future. Except here, Jesus isn't speaking of the future. He says we possess the quality of flourishing here and now.

So we should translate this passage as "You are flourishing when you stop being directed by all the outside voices trying to tell you how to live your life and what to prioritize, and you start reflecting on the meaning and purpose of your life for yourself.

That is really different translation, and one that you probably recognize if you have lived to mid-life.

I've hardly met anyone who lived to 45-50 who doesn't go through a season where the voices of the past suddenly stop working for them. The career you planned on isn't working out, or worse, it is, and you think to yourself, "Is this all there is?" Other people have told you what you need to be happy, independent, and successful, but when you get to the place where you should be able to celebrate, it all feels empty. Or you wake up one fall day, reflecting on your life and the image you have worked so hard to develop; your Facebook persona feels like a cage. You don't want to do this anymore. Even if it has been successful, you want a different kind of success because this just isn't as fulfilling as people told you it would be.

You have this prolonged season where you feel like you're coming apart. Viktor Frankl used to say you are outgrowing the persona other people gave you, the one your parents told you to become, the one your colleagues flattered you into becoming. All of a sudden, you would just like to be you. You want to be more real. You are not quite sure what that looks like, but you know that what you've been tracking towards isn't it. You've been living someone else's image of your life, not your life.

You try doubling down on things that got you through this in the past. Indulge yourself and buy something new. Exercise a perk of power, do something to enhance your image on social media, travel bigger… But none of them work this time. Because, subconsciously, you are seeking a deeper meaning, a better purpose. Without that, your whole life isn't working right anymore,

and for reasons you can't explain, you won't compromise; you won't settle this time.

Carl Jung said this happens because a new you is ready to be born; a new you has been waiting to emerge, but you ignored it. You weren't paying attention, probably because the perks in your old life were good enough that you could distract yourself. And then, you can't distract yourself from this quest anymore.

Albert Schweitzer grew up in France, enormously talented, terrifically educated. He was a concert pianist, educated at the University of Strasbourg, the University of Paris, and the University of Berlin. He studied philosophy and religion, went to Med School, and balanced practicing medicine with concert work at the highest levels in Europe, all by the age of thirty. Amazingly successful with a bright future either teaching or performing music.

But it wasn’t working for him. People had advised him on the path to success his whole life, but he realized he didn’t want to be the center of his own project. He wanted to devote his life to something more, to serving the needs of the world.

At some point, and we don’t have much insight into his internal thoughts, in 1913 he left Paris for Gabon, Africa, and worked in a simple rural clinic treating horrific diseases that poor people suffer from. He stopped listening to the well-meaning voices around him, stopped listening to those who wanted to manage his growing celebrity, and started listening to himself, his conscience, and God.

It wasn’t about personal achievement or fame anymore; it was about service. It wasn’t about what his culture rewarded; it was about his personal convictions, his own character. It wasn’t about showing off all of his achievements. He wanted to serve others

with the gifts he had, and the better the service, the more needed it, the more fulfilling his work became. It wasn't about others recognizing him; it was about what he could give back by helping others. It was a deeper calling, not about how I could make my life feel accomplished, but about leaving the lives of the people around me better because I lived and brought something to the table.

He became "born again", not in the obnoxious way of Pete Hegseth, who thinks he has all the answers when he is clearly clueless. Schweitzer became willing to follow a deeper spiritual path, using his considerable talents to meet human need. Not on the stages of Paris, not in the halls of Europe's finest universities, but in a rural hospital far from the celebrity spotlight where human need was great. No one could understand it. He didn't look back. He waded into deeper meaning.

Make no mistake, there was nothing sexy about it, nothing exotic. He immersed himself in a context of need, of human suffering, where he learned the spiritual currency of making a difference, living out of his real self. Some people thought he was crazy to give up the limelight, the fast track, but Schweitzer stumbled on something more fulfilling, meaning in compassionate service. He discovered himself, and he lived in his own skin, dancing to the music in his soul.

His problems were not all solved, and he wasn't a saint. But he was an authentic version of himself. He had an internal integrity he could recognize as his own. He lived a better version of himself. That is the point.

I hope you too can find your voice, not the voice of your overbearing Dad telling you that he knows better than you what it takes for you to become successful, not the sarcastic voice of your

colleagues who make sport of your values, not the voice of your competitors who undermine your confidence in your abilities. God wants you to find your voice.

Rabbi Zusha once said, "When I get to heaven, God is not going to ask me why I didn't become more like Moses. God won't ask me why I didn't become more like Jesus. God is going to ask me, 'Why didn't you become more like Zusha? Why didn't you become you?

Marianne Williamson was right. She said, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." Now that I am older, I can assure you that you don't want to end up loitering in the vicinity of your own life. You aren't competing against other people. In the end, you are only competing with yourself. Live your life. Find your voice. Be

you. God wants you to evolve until you overcome the fear of becoming authentic.

It is scary as hell, and it turns out to be one of life's most difficult challenges, despite its simplicity. And the clock is ticking, as we are all subconsciously reminded this time of year as the seasons roll over and winter sets in. We aren’t here forever, and the quest for integrity and authenticity grows each year. What is beckoning you? What part of you needs to be made whole?

May you find the courage to dial down the volume of all these outside influencers in your life. May you find the confidence to listen to the still, small voice you hear in the morning's silence and the quiet just before bed. May you allow yourself to be you. And may those you love around you feel the spiritual freedom to be themselves. Faith, hope, and love surround you. Amen.

Our first reading comes from the prophet Isaiah. It reminds us that our lives move in one direction and that spiritual growth shapes us throughout our lives. God is speaking to us, so to speak, in Isaiah 43:18-19. God says, “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! It bubbles up from below; do you not perceive it? I will make a way through the wilderness, providing streams through the wasteland.” What a wonderful promise.

---

[i] From an insightful article on Substack, “The Beatitudes were Never About Being Blessed. Here is What the Original Aramaic Actually Says” by Nabu on April 10, 2026.