

PREACHING TO A BORN AGAIN CULTURE

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Somewhere someone has said that "the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small." The homiletical mills for preachers have to grind faster than that and get a somewhat larger product. That is the reason, no doubt, someone else has said "nearly everything and anything is grist for the homiletical mill." Fifty-two Sundays a year are a lot of Sundays which need sermons and sometimes this grim reality goads us into preaching. What I propose to do is to suggest some sermon recipes for some of those Sundays, hoping that they may be of help as you mix and stir the stuff that flows from your own homiletical mill.

A good sermon, like a good casserole, has many things in it skillfully blended, but usually there is one ingredient which subtly dominates both the aroma and the taste and gives it its identity. What I want to do is to look at the born again casserole, analyze its ingredients, and propose a number of variations on the basic dish.

I

It is absolutely essential in the very beginning that we understand the nature as well as the side-effects of this casserole. Now this sounds silly since we live in a time when the in thing is being born again. After all, it is widely, and even internationally, known that our President is born again. Added to that, any number of former government officials (and one in particular) are born again, so we need to stop and look at what it means.

The first place to look is in the third chapter of John's Gospel where our friend Nicodemus is having trouble. He seems to have difficulty understanding what our Lord said, and it is only fair to Nicodemus to say that millions since have had the same difficulty. Those who are surest that they, and they alone, know what it means to be truly born again are the ones who have usually missed the whole point. Nicodemus, like too many of our people today, was too materialistic. He could not imagine being born in any but materialistic terms. Yet, ironically enough, our difficulty is that we cannot imagine being born again in anything but jaded spiritual terms--terms so aseptic that they do not touch flesh and blood. That is part of the deadliness of our "born again culture." What we need is an incarnational rebirth--a rebirth of the spirit that reveals itself clearly and emphatically in human life. What Nicodemus knew of birth applied only to the function of a womb, but there are other parts of the body which also know a birth process and which point beyond the popular idea of being born again: ideas are born in the mind, dreams and hopes in the heart, and lifestyles in the reins. They all emerge from what is often a painful birth process and grow to maturity in a world of beauty and injustice, joy and sorrow.

With this broadened understanding of being "born again," let's enlarge our sermonic treatment of this very important process. Let me use a very personal illustration. When my twin brother and I were a little over three, our father died and our mother tried to go on, but the flu epidemic made this a futile effort, and

within three years she too was dead, and we small boys went to live with grandparents. It was a devastating experience for me. Mother had been the very center of my life. Across these years I cherish memories of her. She was over-protective, over-supportive, over-affectionate, and I suppose over-loving, and then suddenly I was moved to a home where I found a new family, a new environment, and a new lifestyle--all of which seemed grim and somber and left me a bewildered and frightened little boy. To add to that desolation, I started to school in a room full of strangers--and even recess was a frightening experience. Those first few years were grim beyond accounting. My grandmother's sternness left me fearful. It seemed like teachers in those days were not very perceptive. We were living with my mother's parents and the teachers could not seem to get through their heads that my name was Walkup and Papa's name was Caldwell. Every time we got a new teacher she broke open the old wounds again. It was not what even Charles Dickens would call a happy childhood, but something happened. My rather dour and grim grandmother frightened me, but it was she who worked a miracle.

After I had learned to read, my grandmother took me one day and had me wash my hands which were inspected and accepted as being clean. Then we went into a musty-smelling parlor which was also the library. Here Mama introduced me to her friends, pointing to the books around the walls. At first I thought her friends were the books, but her friends were Mr. Tennyson, Mr. Browning, Mr. Ruskin, and that wonderful Scot, Mr. Thomas Carlyle, and that fascinating Scot, Mr. Robert Burns, and one of Mama's dearest friends, Sir Walter Scott. Mama had opened the door to a new and glorious world. The opening of this door changed everything. In opening this door, she served as the midwife and I had been born again, and nothing would ever be the same. The drabness was gone and here in this world I found joy unbounded. Hours that might have been wasted in self-pity were filled with these friends of Mama's who had now become my friends.

Now I think those of us who have been blessed by being called to preach have a call to take our congregation into the library that we may introduce them to our friends in the pages of scripture. This must be the first ingredient of our born again casserole. Years ago Mr. Ruskin, Mr. Tennyson, and Mr. Carlyle became my friends. Our preaching today can help the men and the women of the scriptures, who are often imprisoned in the pages of the Bible, come alive and become the friends of the congregation. If our culture is to have new eyes, new ways of looking out on the world, it will be because the door to the scriptures has been opened. If we are to preach to a "born again culture," let us look again at the scriptures, not as a collection of doctrines, not as a retelling of dusty old tales or insipid "spiritual" insights, but as the story of God's dealing with real persons who breathed air, who sweat when it was hot and shivered when it was cold--persons used of God. If our preaching opens this door, introduces our congregations to this book, who knows, we could be midwives aiding in the birth struggle of those whose lives have been dull, wounded, and grim.

Now having said this, we need to stop right here and remind ourselves that being born again is not our fault. The second ingredient in our casserole must be humility. We get no credit at all for the new world to which we have been introduced. I did not meet Mr. Ruskin or Mr. Tennyson or Mr. Anybody Else on my own. I met them because my grandmother took me to them. I did not find Jesus Christ by myself--He found me. We don't get credit for being born again--it is His idea. My brother John and I are twins, but I can assure you that it was not my idea or John's. Our wishes, our desires, our work had nothing to do with it. Being a twin is a very convenient

way to be born. It gives you a brother without the real problem of older or younger siblings. You are in it together. But, brilliant as it may seem, it wasn't my idea.

In the same way being born again is not our idea. It is not dependent on our devotion or our skill, and it is not a reward for good deeds. Actually, there is no occasion for pride at all any more so than is there occasion for pride in being born the first time. The second birth is equally out of our hands. One thing that frightens me sometimes, and I think frightens a lot of people in the church, is to hear someone speaking about being born again in such a way that it sounds almost like a boast. It sounds almost like saying, "I have a quality that you don't possess, and don't you wish you were near enough to God to have been born again?" That's not what we are talking about at all, and I can't say that too strongly. Now if we bear this in mind--if we know the whole idea is God's, and if we keep on with our increased understanding of being born again, I think it is altogether likely that God has some words to be spoken to a "born again culture." If we remember that we are not the message, just messengers, we can speak those words.

For is not our task to bring some word from God to bear upon the situation in which our world finds itself in the midst of fear, injustice, anxiety, boredom, and everything else that makes life wretched? Yes, there is one sure word we are called to speak to a "born again culture" and that is the word we hear so emphatically in this same third chapter of John. It is the one word that ought to underlie every thought we think--GOD LOVES LIKE THAT! No matter what we are preaching about, no matter what type of sermon we decide to use, underneath its motive, care, purpose, and form should be this one sure word from God--his love for us in Jesus Christ. This is the one sure word from God to a "born again world." It is the only word that anybody can preach--God loves like that. How? Like we see Him loving in Jesus. Nicodemus was swept off his feet; he just couldn't take it in. John, in writing of this, commented in worshipful wonder, "for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." John was convinced that these words were the only explanation. It had to be love: God loved so much that He gave us this man of Galilee. If we can see this, we are indeed born again and have the sure word, the core center of the message, we are to preach to a "born again culture."

II

Now let's take this basic recipe and see if we can do a little mixing and stirring and come up with some variations on the dish. Let's go back, say to our friend Abraham--you remember Abraham, he was the father of the faithful. He also was the husband of laughing girl, Sarah. And he was the father of Ishmael and Isaac. There is a chapter in the Bible which leaves me shivering every time I read it. It's the chapter that tells about Abraham and Isaac going to the top of the mountain, and Isaac breaking Abraham's heart all the time when he kept saying, "Where is the sacrifice, the sacrificial animal, Father? What are we going to sacrifice when we get to the top of the mountain?"

When I was a little boy, we had a book with a drawing in it of a little boy carrying a bundle of sticks; Mama told me he was taking those sticks to the top of the mountain to make a fire so he could be sacrificed, and it sent shivers through me. How could Abraham be willing to do a thing like this; how in the world could Abraham ever get his own consent? Well, I think we need to see that. I think there is a word from God right here that is more than the word that God doesn't desire human sacrifice. The story shows us something about the depth as well as the

breadth of Abraham's faith. Now faith isn't believing something that we know isn't so; it's trusting. And Abraham so trusted a loving God that he kept going a step at a time, and who of us didn't breathe a sigh of relief when we heard of the ram in the bush, the substitute? How must Abraham have felt that night? How must Isaac have felt when he knew he had been spared, that God in His mercy had provided the ram in the bush! We can't preach on Abraham now as just the Father of the faithful. We can't preach on Abraham now as just the head of the Jewish race. Always when we preach on Abraham to a "born again culture," we must help our people see the gracious love of God that called Abraham out of his old world into a new land and demanded of him a radical faithfulness.

Now it seems to me, if we are to preach effectively to a "born again culture," we will have to develop this theme of God's love. We need to address the issues of our day in the light of that love and in the hope that there will be some new births, some new ways of looking at the world and responding in faithfulness. There might be, for example, a need for us to be born again in regard to race relations. We have some old prejudices that we thought we had left behind. But if we can catch a glimpse of God's great love for us and all people, then surely we will go through a new birth process--as painful as it may be. Or the same thing might be said about the growing economic crisis ahead of us. What will it mean for us, and our Presbyterian congregations, to be born again to a new way of looking out on the economic world? What new doors are opening as we are being called to face, in the light of God's love, economic injustice around us? Or what about our infatuation with success and our self-preoccupation? Do we need to be born again to see that it can be glorious to lose, that the only way to save our life is to lose it, to give it up to a loving God? Or once again, what about the women's issue? According to Edna St. Vincent Milay, St. Paul was a misguided misogynist. Many people consider him a woman hater in less classy terminology. Even so, it is Paul who reminds us that there is neither male nor female for the very good reason that all are one in Christ Jesus. Some of us have read that for years, but it is taking a birth miracle before the words can really spread to our understanding.

In all of this, we are called to preach to a people--us preachers included--who have come to think of being born again as simply a pious religious ritual that has little to do with flesh and blood. Yet every Sunday, we see people get up and come to church that need to be told in different ways of God's love and of the world that love reveals. Our poor earth stumbles on, bleeding and hurting. I know of nothing that can transform us, that can birth us and send us out into the world as a new people, but the vision of God's love for us in Christ Jesus. And who knows, perhaps we have come to the kingdom to preach of that love and be midwives aiding in the birth struggles of our people.