

# **BACK TO THE WOMB?**

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## Introduction

(Show Poster): "John 3:3." Have any of you seen a poster like this at some time or place in your life. Can I ask where? (football game, road-side, public restroom). Who's John? (one of those who wrote down the story of Jesus' life.) What does 3:3 mean? (third chapter, third verse of his story.) There Jesus says "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Jesus is well known now. Some people think he is God, and think everything he said was absolutely true. But imagine if you had never heard of or knew much about Jesus, and you heard him say "unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." That was Nicodemus's position, John tells us. He was a Pharisee, a Jew who took his religion very seriously. When he heard Jesus, his response was to ask a question. "How can a man be born (anew) when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb?" What do you think of that question? Is it a good one? I think so.

In fact I think most questions are good questions, if their purpose is to try to understand another person, or to help yourself decide whether their thinking has value for you. On our bulletin, we say we are "A caring community uniting reason with spiritual exploration." That means we explore religions by asking questions and thinking about whether their teachings have value. We've done it already this year with Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. For the next six weeks every Sunday for children, and some Sundays for adults, we'll be doing it with Christianity.

Actually, when you read the earliest accounts of Jesus life, those written by John, Matthew, Mark and Luke, you'll find that the people he lived with had lots of questions for him. John says in Chapter 7 that "There was much muttering about (Jesus) among the people. While some said, 'He is a good man,' others said, 'No, he is leading the people astray.'" (7:12). Mark, in his Chapter 7, says that Pharisees were puzzled when they saw that Jesus and his followers didn't wash their hands before eating, which is something that all Jews did, and so they asked, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?" (7:1-5) I bet you parents think that's a good question.

Matthew, in chapter 18 of his story, says that Peter, probably Jesus' best friend, heard Jesus say many times that we should love our enemies and forgive those who hurt us. After thinking about this, Peter decided to ask Jesus "How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Do I just go on telling him I still love him no matter how many times he hurts me?" (18:21) Another good question, I think.

And Luke, in the 22nd chapter of his story, describes what happened when the the elders of the Jewish community assembled to question Jesus after he'd been arrested. They said "If you are the Christ, tell us." And then they asked "Are you the Son of God?" (22:66-70) That may be the best

question of all. And if you don't know or remember it, how Jesus answered, you might look it up. It just might surprise you.

This is how we're going to study Christianity these next few weeks, then. Just like we study all human thought - uniting reason with exploring. We're going to ask questions, and then listen to others and to ourselves for answers.

### Sermon

Now, as adults, let's begin our exploration of Christianity - with some questions, of course. How many of you have ever been asked directly: "Have you been born again?" If I asked you that question now, how many would answer "Yes?" How many would answer "No?" How many wouldn't know how to answer? First I'll tell you about one of my earliest responses to this question. And then I'll try to tell you how I'd like to answer it now.

One of my earliest chances at this question, as I remember it, occurred almost 30 years ago now, in my junior year in college. My friend Mark Powell and I had decided to spend our spring break getting away from the Iowa cold by going canoeing in northern Arkansas. Have any of you seen the Burt Reynolds backwoods canoeing movie Deliverance? Then you have an idea of where this story is heading.

Day 1 of our trip was completely spent driving to Arkansas and pitching our camp in the dark. As it happened, it snowed that night, making it impossible to get our car out to the river-access road, so days 2 & 3 were spent trapped in camp. On day 4, after finally getting our canoe onto what the locals called "the Crooked Creek", we spent that day and the next careening down the spring-rain-swollen channel, ramming into submerged truck-crossings and getting caught up in barbed-wired cattle guards. We capsized three times; I nearly drowned once. And by 4:00p.m. on Day 5 we were just one-fourth of the way to our destination - the town of Yellville. Enough for canoeing, we decided, time for help. We stowed the canoe at a farm road crossing, and for the next 2 hours we walked down a deserted red-earth road, past deserted shacks. I fainted twice. Then just at nightfall, we finally came upon "civilization" - a hardscrabble hog farm with a beat-up pick-up truck (squirrel guns in the rifle rack), and two men in the yard. We asked them, "Could you give us a lift to Yellville?" "Sure," they responded, "hop in." So sitting four abreast in the front seat, Mark and I between the hog farmers, we traveled 2 more miles into deeper woods, and then driver's partner turns to look us in the eye, and says, "You boys been born again?"

Well, I mean to tell you, my mind went into hyper-drive. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God," I remembered. I knew I wasn't ready to see the kingdom of God that day; I just wanted to see Yellville. But I had only recently decided that I was not a Christian. At that proud age honesty meant everything to me. So my mouth froze. "Thank God!" I might say, my friend Mark was less conflicted. "You betcha," he lied, without batting an eye. And, as it turned out, that lie was all salvation required that day. We did see Yellville that night, and several places thereafter. But ever since that experience, I've never stopped wondering "Is there some way I could come up with an honest "yes" to that question, "Have you been born again."

The reason we encounter John 3:3 signs in our public life, of course, is that their holders, self-proclaimed followers of Jesus, want us to feel challenged by these words. When Nicodemus asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb?" what did Jesus answer? "Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" - which our sign-brandishers want to interpret to mean that unless one is baptized into membership in the Christian church, we are not worthy of God's love. Their challenge is "Join us or be lost for eternity." As Unitarian Universalists, as Christians at most with a small "c", I can think of at least two ways we might respond to that challenge.

First off, we can clearly join with many self-proclaimed capital "C" Christians to affirm that this "unless one is born of water and the spirit" teaching should not be seen as part of the eternal essence of Jesus' legacy. Christianity accepts four gospel accounts of Jesus' life. Many well-known teachings appear in all four accounts, but the "born anew" teaching appears only in the gospel according to John. Because research indicates that John's was the last of the four gospels to be compiled, and that it was compiled in a time of increasing threat to Christians from the surrounding culture, we can at least wonder whether this "get yourself baptized" challenge was really Jesus' own or was put in his mouth by a nervous Christian community trying to rally hangers-on to join them and increase their strength. John's is also the only gospel which finds Jesus teaching "No one shall come to the Father except through me." At the very least, the absence of this kind of "one way" teaching from the earlier 3 gospels gives us a basis for questioning whether it is central to Jesus' teachings.

Unitarianism and Universalism, of course, both first arose as spiritual teachings within the early Christian community. Unitarianism was the teaching that God was one in spirit, and Jesus, however revered as the Son of Man, was distinct from God. Universalism was first the teaching that Jesus' God, being perfected love, must eventually grant salvation to all people - and this understanding of Christianity was being taught, by Origen of Alexandria, within the same century that John's gospel was compiled. It took three centuries before a Roman Church Council decided that Origen's teaching was a heresy. And then it took another 12 centuries for that teaching to resurface in certain British and German Protestant churches, from which such men as George de Benneville and John Murray, in the late 1700s, came here to our country to actually found the first churches proclaiming this faith. Another century further on, this all-inclusive approach to salvation led our churches to recast themselves as beyond Christian, placing other prophets' teachings alongside Jesus' as helpful paths to spiritual wisdom. So today, when you look at our statement of the sources from which our living tradition draws, you see that we acknowledge "wisdom from the world's religions" and that we restrict our allegiance to "Christian teachings" to those which "teach us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." This is our Universalist heritage.

Now if you can be here two weeks from now, you'll get a completely self-sufficient response to the claim that we must be born anew of water to enter God's Kingdom. On that Sunday we will welcome Janna Marley, Kate and Tom's new daughter, into our care. As always, we will use no water in the ceremony; we will perform no ritual washing away of some supposed original sin. Rather we all together will proclaim *Janna Megan Marley*, her full name, her first badge of individuality. Through that rite we will affirm and accept her as she is and encourage her to grow as her unique spirit leads

her.

Must one be born anew, in Christian baptism, to see the Kingdom of God? Perhaps Jesus said so. Perhaps he didn't. Either way, we respond "No." One birth is all the ticket any person needs to see, and be worthy of, our God's love.

And perhaps that's enough of a response for you. For me, however, it's only half a response. If this teaching attributed to Jesus can only mean that one must be a baptized Christian to be worthy of Godly love, then I reject it wholeheartedly. But I believe that there is another meaning possible to the suggestion that one must be born anew - a meaning more in tune with our covenant to "affirm and promote spiritual growth in our congregations." And I believe we can find it if we let the larger body of Jesus' words help us interpret this teaching.

Among the questions Jesus was asked, according to Matthew's gospel, was this one: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus began his answer there exactly as he did in John's gospel, "Truly I say to you, unless you," - but in Matthew he says, not "unless you are born anew" but rather "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (18:3) I wonder if this small change in the report might lead us to a more helpful interpretation of Jesus's intent.

Just as we can't enter the womb again, we obviously cannot become entirely like a child again. Indeed our spirits would not be helped by our doing so. Does anyone here remember the old TV series Barney Miller? In one of my favorite scenes from that show, the aging character called Detective "Fish" (played by Abe Vigoda) was being egged egged into doing something by his young bull of a colleague Wojohowicz.

"Come on Fish," Wojo" chides Fish, "it will make you feel like a kid again"

Fish responds, "I was a kid once. I wasn't very good at it."

Even Jesus' most influential follower, Paul of Tarsus, affirmed the value of aging. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways." (13:11-12:) In part, however, I believe that the value of age's wisdom can be found in seeing and fully appreciating the virtues of childhood.

"Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." This is also one of Jesus' teachings, according to Matthew. But I don't think that childlike innocence is a virtue we should seek to retrieve. A child is innocent because he or she is ignorant of evil, not because he or she knows evil and has chosen to eschew it. Our faith's covenant affirms "the free and responsible search for truth." That means we find spiritual growth in actively seeking out knowledge of both good and evil. Our sources statement then says, we look to "words and deeds of prophetic men and women" to help us "challenge powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." Monastic cultists may seek growth in childlike innocence, but that cannot be our path to fuller life.

In Luke's account of Jesus's teaching, though, there's a slight modification of what Matthew recorded. As Luke has it, Jesus said, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (18:17) There I think is a helpful direction.

How does a child receive what is offered him or her? We only survive childhood by receiving the nourishment, the care and the protection of our elders, and so our earliest habits are to reach out for what is offered us in trust that it will bring us life. As a child we receive, in full knowledge and acceptance of our dependence. But what happens as we grow up? We gain a certain amount of power. We learn to become independent in fulfilling our short-term needs for food, shelter and pleasure. And in that process we become wary of receiving anything. We'd rather make it ourselves or do without. For two centuries our faith may have been the strongest proponents of independence as the path to salvation. Our historic hallmarks are embodied in our covenant to pursue "the free search for truth and meaning" and to affirm the rights of "individual conscience." In fact, only in this generation have we come to affirm that our search must be "responsible" as well as "free." Only now are we learning "to affirm and promote ... respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" We're only really beginning to see that the truth will make us free in some ways - free from superstition for example - but not in others - not free from nature. We are just beginning to affirm that the truth should make us accept and celebrate our dependence on powers beyond our own. Is this our path to spiritual growth - to be "born anew," with a child's ability to receive in trust? I wonder.

Matthew's Jesus goes further. "Whoever humbles himself (or herself) like this child, he (she) is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (18:4). Here I think is a really helpful direction. Perhaps to grow in spirit, we are called to be "born anew" to a child's humility. Humility does not come easily to us, "children of the enlightenment." With reform Jews, our average education and household income are the highest of any American religious group. In countless ways, life has told most of us just how special and valuable we are. Our covenant just ices the cake, affirming first and foremost our (and, oh, incidentally everyone else's) worth and our dignity.

Forrest Church, my colleague and friend, actually delivered some lectures some years ago entitled *Born Again Unitarian Universalism*. In them he said, "When we are brought into this world at birth everything around us is perceived as nothing more than an extension of our own being ... we tend to take life for granted. ... we begrudge life's limitations, especially death as it inevitably steals into our consciousness. The secret to born-again Unitarian Universalism is simply this. At some point it may dawn upon us that life is not a given, but a gift. It is not something to be taken for granted; it is an undeserved, unexpected gift, holy, awesome and mysterious. ... If our first birth is an unconscious passage during which the breath of life, the gift of life, is bestowed upon us without our knowing, then to be born again is distinguished by a conscious accepting of the gift of life. From this point on one strives to remember to take life for granted no longer. Rather than begrudging its inherent limitations, one accepts life as a gift reverentially, with humility and thanksgiving." (p.78-79)

"If our religion does not inspire in us a sense of awe at the wonder of our very being, it has failed us, or rather we (have failed) it. And if, from that sense of wonder, we are not compelled to respond in some life-protecting, life-enhancing, life-affirming way, then we must go back and start again and again until the wonder we experience proves itself to be authentic by the quality to it." What this means is that "Born-again Unitarian Universalism, is not a once and forever process." We must be "born again and again and again." ... born again to those powers we first knew in childhood, the power to trust in our dependence, the power to be humble and thankful to be simply alive at all.

And let me tell you, it is a great relief to me to know that if ever again I find myself in such a pick-up truck, squirrel guns in the rack behind me, deep unknown woods all around me, just hoping to get to another day in Yellville, and I'm asked "you been born again," I can truthfully respond "Yes," and leave to my inner thoughts the addenda "I think so, a few times already, with a few more to come, I hope."

But if you're inclined to make a more forceful response to those who proclaim John 3:3 as the key to salvation, perhaps you'd be interested in my suggestion for bringing water to their fire. Next time you go to a baseball game, you could even bring your own sign. For as I see it, Jesus provides his own antidote for their claim. You could, of course, just mark your sign Matt.18:4, to suggest that the "humility of a child" is what's really called for. But if you want to suggest a whole new kind of challenge, you might choose to advertise another passage. This is my favorite response (Show poster: Luke 17:20). It's here that Jesus says, "The Kingdom is not coming with signs to be observed ... the Kingdom of God is within you."