

A New Kind of Life  
United Church of Broomfield  
April 16, 2023

1 Peter 1:3-9

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

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Last Sunday we baptized Sadie Leach – all of 7.5 months old. She has the sweetest, calmest disposition; I practically drowned her, and she didn't seem to care. She is cute as a button; she doesn't own a thing and is completely helpless.

She's not really helpless though because her parents and grandparents, I know, have done everything they can to ensure she'll have everything she needs. She is an heir to greatness that awaits her in the future. She will be the future queen of iPiel's a little bit like our situation as newborn Christians, otherwise known as "born-again Christians."

Unfortunately, the phrase "born-again Christian" has often been seen as "fighting words" - even among Christians. I'll admit that I don't particularly care for the label, because it has a connotation of moral superiority which bothers me - like being a first-class Christian, in contrast to other second-class ones. Sometimes the phrase "You must be born again" is spoken almost as a threat. And in reaction, other Christians avoid the language entirely because they don't want to sound intolerant or fanatical.

While we need to be careful with "born-again" language, it is biblical. Our reading for today is a good example: "By his great mercy God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

The biblical concept of being born again isn't a threat but a tremendous promise. This is a good text for this Easter season in which we focus on the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. On Easter, Jesus did not just return to the same type of life he'd been living before but to a new level of life: "Death has no more dominion over him," Paul said. And the new life, the born-again life that is promised to believers, is possible because of Jesus' resurrection.

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Something completely new in the whole history of the world happened at Easter. Jesus' rising from the dead meant that all the powers of sin, death and destruction were deprived of their power. They can rage and threaten and still cause a great deal of harm, but they have no final authority over humanity.

It's pretty bold language to say that sin and death have no final power over us, so let's make sure we understand why we can say something like that. Is it because our true selves are immortal beings who can't really be harmed by death? That's a popular New Age dream (though it's really as old as dirt), but it's not true. God alone, not human beings, has immortality.

Can we claim victory over sin because we're highly moral people who can resist all kinds of temptations and keep from sinning, so that we can live in complete purity? I don't think so. We may struggle against temptations, but we fall for them all too easily. We are not immortal, sinless beings, as each one of us knows all too well from the inside.

The reason for saying that sin and death are ultimately powerless, and the reason for being able to talk about a new life, is the resurrection of Jesus. He died like millions of others, and lay with all the hopeless dead in that common grave that the people of Israel called Sheol, the underworld. Sheol was the land from which no one returned - and God raised Jesus from the dead. And since Jesus lives, the realm of the dead is no longer a land without hope.

Jesus died our death, sharing one hundred percent in our human condition. And in turn, we are given a share in his new life. Jesus did not just rise from the dead for himself, like the hero in a story who somehow escapes death at the last minute so that there can be a sequel, Jesus II. He is risen for the whole human race, so that we might be raised with him. That's what our text begins by giving thanks for: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" for giving us a new birth through the resurrection.

This new birth is the work of God alone. "By [God's] great mercy" we have been born anew. The King James translation makes this even clearer by saying that God "hath begotten us again unto a lively hope." It's God who makes it happen. Just as a baby can take no credit for being born or claim to have helped in the process, so a Christian should give all the credit to God for having been born again. It has nothing to do with how good we are or what we've done to deserve life but is entirely God's gift.

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Some biblical scholars think that the letter of 1 Peter comes from a baptismal setting, and it may even have parts of a sermon to newly baptized Christians. That would fit with several things in the letter, including the reference to baptism in the third chapter. And in several other places in the New Testament, language about being born again is linked with baptism. When Jesus explains being "born anew" or "born from above" in the Gospel of John, he says that it means "being born of water and Spirit."

And baptism says very clearly that it is God who is doing something. The person who is baptized, adult or child, is passive: He or she just stands or lies there. It is by God's command and promise that baptism happens and amounts to anything.

We make a big deal of birthdays because being born is kind of important. But it isn't the end of a person's story. In the same way, our picture of the Christian life would be sadly incomplete if it ended with being born again at some particular moment. Baptism or a person's conversion experience can be an emotional and memorable event, but the new life goes on from there. Our text immediately points us from the reality of new birth to "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you." The new birth is as children of God, people called to share in God's life.

To say that that inheritance is "kept in heaven" means that we do not have it fully now. But it is in God's care, and nothing earthly can harm it. It's like a situation in which a new baby is the heir to a valuable estate that is

kept in a trust fund so that nothing can threaten it until the child reaches the proper age. In the same way, our inheritance as children of God is kept secure.

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We sometimes refer to a person who's been lucky enough to have rich parents as having "been born with a silver spoon in his mouth." In one sense that's what Peter is saying about Christians, but it doesn't mean that those who are born again will have an easy life in the world. Several things in this letter indicate that it was sent to Christians who were experiencing harassments and persecutions because of their faith, and it was written to encourage them to persevere in the faith despite hardships.

Even when Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire, the government authorities usually didn't seek out Christians to persecute. A lot of the trouble that ordinary Christians had, came from suspicion and hatred from their neighbors. Christians were different. They refused to take part in popular religious exercises, and they had moral standards that kept them apart from a lot of public activities, like the spectacles in the arena. Even though Christians accepted the emperor and other authorities - as in fact this letter tells them to - they put Christ, and not the security of the state, in first place. So, their neighbors would circulate rumors and sometimes report them to the police.

As the United States becomes more and more secular, if Christ is first in your life you may find yourself in situations in which people think you're weird, stupid, fanatical or even subversive. Peter says that that's to be expected, and he doesn't tell the Christians he's writing to, or us, how to avoid those difficulties. They're going to happen. But he tells us that our inheritance is secure, and that the difficulties we encounter as Christians will be turned to good purpose by God.

They will be used for cleansing and purifying, so that our new lives as Christians will be made even closer to what God intends for us to be. All trials will be like fire used to purify a precious metal so that in the end it will be even more valuable. And as we continue to trust in Christ through it all we have assurance of the new relationship with God that Christ attained through his death and resurrection.

In our lives as children of God we will face hardships. We are, after all, called to take up our crosses and follow Christ. But we are reborn with far more than silver spoons in our mouths. "You are receiving the outcome of your faith," our reading ends, "the salvation of your souls."

AMEN