

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent  
March 1, 2026  
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney  
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church  
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Genesis 12:1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17  
John 3:1-17

“Very truly, I tell you,  
no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.”

Jesus says that confounding statement to Nicodemus.  
In the Gospel of John, we just have the story of the meeting.  
If you’ve seen *The Chosen*, there’s much more lead up to the conversation.

Nicodemus has seen the fruits of Jesus’ ministry,  
seen the healing of the demon-possessed Mary of Magdala,  
and he wants to know:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God;  
for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

And Jesus answers him: “Very truly,”  
when Jesus says: “very truly”,  
it means “pay attention, take notes, this is important.”  
“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.”

Huh? What are you talking about?

Unfortunately in English, the word chosen depends on translation.  
The Greek word in the Gospel of John  
for the re-birth Jesus describes is “*another*”  
Depending on the translation of the Bible you read,

Jesus can be saying,

- you must be born again,
- you must be born anew, or
- you must be born from above.

Having been raised in a Fundamentalist church,  
being “born again” always meant being “saved”.

The key phrase was: “accepting Jesus Christ as your personal savior.”

One of my early rectors told me, “Christ gives us what we need.”

She had never had the “conversion experience,” but she was devout.

Abram was “born again” in our reading from Genesis.

He chooses to do God’s will

and leaves home and family to wander into he knows not where.

Paul’s letter to the church in Rome recognizes the righteousness of Abraham  
in being recreated by God as the Father of Nations.

Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, being zapped by the light,  
knocked to the ground, and having God put him on the right road  
– no ifs, ands or buts – the straight and narrow.

For me, I don’t think that’s what Jesus was talking about.

To base salvation on a single interaction with the Holy Spirit

means that those who do not have that experience are not among the saved.

Rather, I’d suggest Abram is a better example of the faithfulness  
that leads to the Kingdom of God.

I want to tell you a story of an anonymous young man

I read about in Allan Hamilton’s book, *Cerebral Entanglements*.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s call him Tommy. He’s fourteen, a kid of the streets in Baltimore:

no family, no home. He’s befriended by a gang. They give him food,

a place to sleep, a sense of belonging. He wants to join, to truly belong.

The only catch: to be a member you have to murder someone.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cerebral Entanglements: How the Brain Shapes Our Public and Private Lives* by Allan J. Hamilton, Post Hill Press, 2025; pp. 77-79.

He wanders the dark streets and encounters another lone teenager.  
He pulls a pistol, shoots him, and runs to claim his membership.  
The murder is front-page news. Instead of being welcomed into the gang,  
the members fear retribution and hand Tommy over to the police.

At his trial for murdering the only child of a single mother,  
Tommy was unnerved by a woman, who stared at him silently.  
Being a minor, Tommy was sentenced to three years,  
and as the bailiff led Tommy from the courtroom, the woman stood up,  
identified herself as his victim's mother, shook a finger at him, and announced:  
"I am going to kill you."

No one, no family, no friends, no gang members visited Tommy.  
Nearly a year into his sentence, a letter arrived from his victim's mother.  
Let's call her Mrs. Shephard. She asks permission to visit  
and enclosed a few dollars, perhaps as a bribe to allow the visit.  
With that he was able to buy cigarettes and candy at the commissary.  
He was anxious about meeting her but agreed out of loneliness.

At their meeting, Mrs. Shephard asked about his life, where he was from,  
how he was raised, about his life, and finally, why he had killed her son.  
As she was leaving she gave him a carton of cigarettes,  
and asked if she could write and visit again. He agreed.

As their relationship grew, she persuaded Tommy to take classes,  
earn a GED. He did well getting good grades for the first time in his life.  
As his sentence neared its end Mrs. Shephard asked about his plans.  
He had none and doubted anyone would give a convicted murderer a job.  
After some time and a lot of thought,  
she offered to have him stay at her house in the spare room.

After his release, Tommy moved in, started a job she found for him.  
They shared meals at the table her son had eaten and grown up.  
Tommy spent hours talking with the mother of the boy he had murdered.  
After about eight months, Mrs. Shephard asked him to talk.

“Do you remember in the courtroom  
when I said I was going to kill you?”

“I sure do. I’ll never forget that moment.”

“Well, I did. I did not want the boy  
who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth.  
I wanted him to die. That’s why I started to visit you and bring you things.  
That’s why I got you the job and let you live here in my house.  
That’s how I set about changing you. And that old boy, he’s gone.  
So now I want to ask you, since my son is gone, and that killer is gone,  
if you’ll stay here. I’ve got room, and I’d like to adopt you if you let me.”<sup>2</sup>

Allan Hamilton ends his telling of the story with a question:

“How can human beings have this capacity to care for each other  
and forgive each other?”

I believe that we all have the capacity to grow in love and caring.  
Just as Tommy died to the boy he was to become an adopted son,  
so we are called to die to who we were  
to become the adopted children of a loving God.

Christians are truly born again  
because we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Just as we emerge from the water of our mothers’ wombs,  
so we emerge from the water of baptism – born again:  
dead to our old selves and – born anew – as members of the body of Christ.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever  
believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

Too often we so focus on verse sixteen of John’s Gospel  
And we don’t realize its tie to verse 17.

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,  
but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

The message is one of hope for the world and not one of despair. Jesus tells Nicodemus this truth when he references the incident in the desert with the Hebrews.

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

What Jesus is referring to is an oft forgotten episode. The Hebrews wandering in the wilderness had again offended God and were being bitten by poisonous vipers. Moses pleads with God to save them. So, God has Moses cast a bronze serpent and raise it up so that whoever it bitten, if they look upon the image, are healed and will not die. That’s the message John gives us about the cross.

When we see the Cross it does not refer only to the crucifixion, but to the continuity of Jesus: his life, his crucifixion, his resurrection and his ascension. These are all one, and we must remember that when we look upon the cross. For John, the Cross of Christ is a throne for the King of kings and Lord of lords.

From our vantage point, particularly during Lent, when we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we look up to the Cross and see the promise of life everlasting.

In that moment we are all born anew,  
we are all born again,  
we are all born from above.

Amen.