



## LESSONS for LIFE

**February 24, 2008, 7:00 p.m.**

**BORN AGAIN**

**Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.**

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So what is the purpose of religion? What is the purpose of Church? You could ask that question to fifty different clergy or rabbis or religious leaders of one kind or another and you'd probably get fifty different answers. But I wonder if we ask God what worship is about, or if we ask Jesus what worship is about, I think we might be surprised at the answer we get. I think one of the mistakes of Christianity, and many of the world's religions, is that we have made worship, we have made church about God. And I think that's a mistake. I think that's a mistake; that's not what God wants. God doesn't need our praise; God doesn't require of us to grovel; God doesn't reward us for praise and worship; God is not that kind of a jealous or selfish or narrow God. I believe that we need worship; that the value of worship is for us; that we need to say thank you. That we need to praise; that we need to raise our voices and to give thanks. So then when we say, why then do we have church? What's it about? For some they would say that church is about making sure that everyone knows the rules. So you can live by the rules, so when it comes time for Judgment Day you'll be able to pass the test and you'll get an 'A' instead of an 'F'. You'll go up, instead of down. It will be warm, instead of very hot. I don't think that's the case. I think that when Jesus said 'I've come so that you may have life, and that you might have it more abundantly,' I think in the little phrase Jesus was telling us that what Church is to be about, what religion is to be about, what God wants and what Jesus wants, is for us to maximize this amazing experience called life. This gift that God has given to us; this amazingly creative God, who has put together this earth entrusted to our care (and we need to do a better job) and who has given to each one of us this gift of life every morning that we wake. We have another day in front of us to learn, to grow, to love, to experience this great gift. And I think that Jesus came to help us experience this gift more and more abundantly. And I think that when the authors of the scriptures from the Old Testament to the Book of Revelations consistently say things like this: 'Rejoice always and again I say rejoice.' When Jesus said 'My Peace I give to you,' when Jesus said 'Love God with your whole being' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself' that life is meant to be about rejoicing and celebration. That life is meant to be about peaceful. Life is meant to be about abundance, not just for some of us, but for all of us. And not just occasionally, and not just when we meet a new partner and we're all excited for a few weeks or months – but that our life is to be about rejoicing. And the purpose I believe of religion is to help us experience, to identify what the obstacles are, to help us learn how to deal with the influencers that kind of push us down or inflate us inappropriately, and to help us be on a more even keel. So we're doing something very unusual during this season of Lent when it's more traditional to reflect inwardly and to feel all bad and to give up. Instead, this Lent we're doing something different. We're focusing on a book called 'Happiness Now'; we're focusing on if the Bible says, as it does, 'Rejoice always, always, again I say rejoice'. Paul said 'I have learned in whatever circumstance, no matter what life throws at me' (if you read his life a lot of things were thrown at him), he says 'I have learnt that no matter what the circumstance are, that I can give thanks continually'.

The book 'Happiness Now' by a man named Robert Holden talks about this. It talks about this, it talks about how can we experience happiness as a way of life not as a momentary experience.



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The first week we started out I did a cute little thing, I put my glasses here (hooking them onto his cassock) – now you don't realize that once I did this I couldn't see my notes at all – so I had to memorize the next few lines before I got my glasses back on again, as I am this evening, but I said okay, if we're going to take a look for happiness, we go searching for happiness, you know the folks to the South in their constitution talks about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – and that's the problem. That as long as we pursue it, as long as we go searching for it, we will never find it, except momentarily. And Robert Holden said it's just like trying to find, or well, he didn't say, I said, it's just like trying to find my glasses. If I go over here and look for them - my glasses where I was sitting, or look at my notes stand for my glasses, or ask Ben where he hid them, I would never find my glasses, until I look right here. And soon as I realize that it's here all along, then I'll find my glasses, and you look much better than you did before I put them back on again.

The same thing is true with happiness. As long as we look for it out there, in others or in the circumstances around us, we will never find it as a way of life; but to begin by looking in here. And then last week we talked about happiness not being a set of circumstances, not being finding a partner, or getting a better job, or having more money or even having better health, not being a set of circumstances. Not relying on recognitions. But that happiness is a set of attitudes, not a set of circumstances. We talked about the foundational attitude, last week, about remembering that you are created in the image of God. The stuff of God is in you

The essence of God is in you. That's where we start. Not with original sin, but original blessing. Not with a sinner needing to be saved at all. But what we start with is, the sons and daughters of God. With the stuff of God in us, that's where we begin to build our lives and experiences. Then he talked about some of the other attitudes might be.

And Holden in his book says that there are three ingredients to happiness. Number 1 is re-connecting to that place in you of love and peace and joy. Those three things are the ingredients of happiness. Love and peace and joy. And if you let love live in you and flow through you; joy live in you and flow through you; peace live in you and flow through you. If you reconnect to those things and say that nothing can take those away from you. Nothing can take those away your love and your peace and your joy. There will be external circumstance that will influence you – for the positive and the negative – they are influencers, they are not deciders. You are the decider.

Now this is news that might irritate some people, because some of us have got into a routine and have got very comfortable blaming everybody else for a problem. Blaming God, blaming our ex, blaming our ex's new partner, blaming our parents for what happened when we were young, blaming the people at work, blaming life, it's become very comfortable, thank you. And yet the message from Holden and the message from scripture is we need to take responsibility again for our own lives and stop giving away our power to others, people or things. Love and peace and joy. And so today there are two readings I want to share with you for the sermon this evening. The first is reading from Robert Holden's book:

*Where there is love,  
Tears smile  
Hurts soften*



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*Guilt loses its edge,  
Judgments forget to judge  
Fear is no longer afraid  
Separation is over  
Where there is love, you are there.*

The more we get in touch with that place inside where love resides, the more the hurt softens, and the judgments go away and the separation ceases.

The second reading from the Gospel of John, the 3rd Chapter beginning with the first verse:

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of Jewish people. He came to Jesus and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do, apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, no one can see the realm of God without being born again.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can you enter a second time into your mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Truly I tell you no one can enter the realm of God without being born of water and spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I say to you, you must be born again.'*

So this evening, I want us to look at the concept of being born again as one of the most important decisions you will ever make. Now in order to do this, we have to set aside the fundamentalist view of being born again. This attitude, that in order to get to Heaven you have to be born again, in order to get to Heaven you have to accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour; that that's the magic formula; that that's the only way for it to happen. That's what born again means. That is not what the Bible is talking about at all.

If you take a very strict, literalist view of scripture I can see, I can get that misinterpretation. But that is not what the Bible is talking about. The concept of salvation is an ancient concept. If you read the first half of the Bible, we call it the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures, if you read it, it talks about salvation. It talks about healing your relationship with God. It talks about the Old Testament, prophets as being our saviours, the ones who help us to heal our relationship with God. So Jesus comes along in that great tradition, being another one, yes some of us would say, and I'm one of them, uniquely one of them. An amazing example, even maybe the Son of God. Jesus comes along to help heal our relationship with God, so for you if Jesus is the one that does that, then for you, yes it's true to say Jesus is your Saviour, because He's the one who's helped to heal your relationship with God. But there are other ways to heal that relationship. Moses helped a whole people to go deeper; the Old Testament, prophets throughout history help people to go deeper and to heal and to connect back to God again. And I personally believe that one day in Heaven we're going to meet all kinds of people who are going to be there and they are going to say, 'And who is this one that they call Jesus? And who's this one called Jesus?' They may have never heard His name, born in a time or country where He was not known, but someone shared the news, someone else helped them to heal their relationship with God.



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A few years ago we did a sermon series on a book called 'The heart of Christianity' and I strongly recommend it do you, it's written by a man named Marcus Borg. Not everything in the book you'll agree with, I didn't, but it is a phenomenal, phenomenal book. And in his book, he talks about a young girl who is two years old, and when she was two, the parents decided to have another baby. And little the two year old girl said when the baby comes home I want to talk to her by myself. The parents were a little nervous because you know sometimes kids are jealous of the next baby, so they were a little nervous, but she was a good kid, so they said okay. They had a monitor in the nursery set up, so nine months later when they brought the baby home, they took the baby and took their 2 year-nine month old child into the nursery where the baby was and they left the room. The little girl walked up the baby and they could hear her on the monitor saying, 'Would you tell me about God, because I've almost forgotten'. You know, we think children are silly because of their imaginary friends; because of the magical world that they live in. I think children are much more connected to the spiritual realm than we more reasonable adults are. She said, 'Could you tell me about God, I've almost forgotten.' We come from God; we come from that spiritual realm and when we're born, Borg talks about a natural process that happens, a natural process of independence. We have to learn how to breathe separate from our mother, we have to learn how to breathe; this child had to learn how to breathe separate from her, how to learn how to eat separate from her, had to learn how to walk, yes; how to learn what lights are and what the ceiling is all by yourself; eventually learning how to walk all by himself, that natural process of independence occurs. The difficulty is that with that natural process of independence of moving further and further away from our source, further and further away from where we came from. That independence leads us away and at some point we have to make a decision to come back to that source again and that's what Jesus is talking about. Jesus says, 'That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.' You need to have a second birth; you need say I want to come back again, to that source where I came from.

Robert Holden in his book addresses this a little bit differently, but very similar. He says that at birth we come from God, the essence of who we are is love and peace and joy, that's who we are. That's the authentic self. But at birth we begin to separate, he uses that word instead of independence, he uses separation. At birth we are separated from our mother's womb and we learn to be on our own. We separate ourselves from each other. We move away from the oneness that we came from and we separate ourselves further and further from God. And we separate ourselves from that part which is most infused with the presence of God; and we move away from God. The challenge is how do we increase our independence, learning to walk and to think, taking responsibility for ourselves, how do we increase our independence while maintain our connectedness? Our connectedness to our source: God; our connectedness to other people, seeing ourselves as less and less an independent one and more a connected whole. So, the key, as Jesus said is to make a decision to be born again. 'That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.' We must be born again. We make a decision to have a second birth, a spiritual birth that is your choice. Now for some of you, this decision for a second birth, a re-birth, will be a dramatic event. Maybe it will come in a church service when a particular message or something really hits home to you and says to you this is where I need to go; this is what I need to do differently. Maybe it will come in a midst of a musical piece that will move you; maybe it will come in the midst of a disaster, an awful situation in your life when you hit rock bottom and you realize in the midst of that crisis that you have a choice to make. For other folks there will be no dramatic moment. There will be a gradual



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awakening, a gradual reconnecting, a gradual remembering your connectedness. Nicodemus said to Jesus, 'How can I be born again when I am old?' Jesus said, 'You have to be born of the spirit, to reconnect spiritually to your source.' In Judaism, this reconnecting is called The Way; in Islam, one of the meanings of the word Islam is to surrender, that tradition is about surrendering yourself to God; in Buddhism, it's about letting go. All of those major world religions join with Christianity into encouraging you to make a decision, to live a different kind of life, a life's that reconnected to the source, your source.

Robert Holden said in being born again, the pain of our lives breathes, yes, it feels less intense, yes it subsides, there is room to breathe. Being born again means our tears smile, difficulties will always be there, but our response to them changes and their power over us diminishes. Hurt softens and guilt loses its edge when you decide to be born again to connect with the spirit. Those harmful emotions no longer impact us. Judgment stops and fear loses its fear of itself, because we can come home to who we've always been. We can come home to happiness; we can come home to God. Jesus told a parable that described all this in a little parable to us. Jesus told us about a story about a young man who was raised in a loving family; family that cared so much about him. When later on in life he wanted his independence, he wanted to separate from his family, he wanted to take his inheritance and go away. And they loved him so much, they gave him his freedom, and he moved away literally, and separated himself and became even more independent, and he squandered everything: his inheritance and the years of his life, and in the middle of that crisis, he made a decision; he decided to go back home. And he went back home and he was accepted by a loving parent with no judgment and Jesus told that story to describe what God is like. And what we are like sometimes when we become so independent and so separated, that if make that decision to come back home again, that God will be there to love us and to accept us without judgment. And so this evening, I say to you, the invitation is there for you to come back home to that place, that place of love and peace and joy, to the kind of God who will accept you without judgment and who will give you a second life, even a new birth.

Amen.