

There is a great new series on HBO based on the book John Adams by David McCullough. The first program details the events leading up to the vote in the continental congress for independence – the debates, the intrigue as Adams and Ben Franklin work to convince those who want to continue negotiations with England to support their cause. Finally the day of the vote arrives, and one by one each of the representatives of the 13 colonies casts his vote in favor of the motion for independence. As the last vote is cast there are no cheers of elation and victory, there is only silence. One senses two powerful emotions in their reaction – on the one hand a tremendous sense of accomplishment and relief that says “We’ve done it!”, and on the other hand a deep awareness of the consequences of their decision that says “What have we done?”. The “What have we done?” was the realization that the step they had taken meant war and inevitable suffering for so many. But they were willing to risk everything they were and had for the opportunity of forming a new and free country. These men believed that they had the opportunity, in Thomas Paine’s words, to begin the world anew. This is what July 4<sup>th</sup> was all about, but time and familiarity have distanced us from the impact of these events. Now July 4 is mostly about a long summer weekend, barbecues, pool parties, great sales at the mall, golf tournaments, flag waving, and fireworks.

I think the same can happen with our view of the resurrection – because of time and familiarity we often think of it more as a theological concept. We celebrate it once a year, but do we understand that the resurrection has implications for who we are and how we live every day. In our Scripture today Peter is reminding his readers that the resurrection still means something for them 30 years after the event, and these things are just as true for us 1900 plus years later. I don’t think it’s an accident that Peter is teaching these early Christians about the resurrection – for Peter the resurrection had a particular importance. Peter, who had promised to lay down his life for Jesus, and then only hours later denied him three times. The resurrection meant that Peter was not left with his guilt and shame, instead he was forgiven and restored by the risen Christ.

Just a word about Peter’s audience – he describes them as exiles and aliens. They were sojourners in a foreign land, but Peter is also using their status as exiles as a metaphor for their experience as Christians – they are aliens and foreigners in this world because as Christians they have different values and a different allegiance. They are facing hostility because they are no longer willing to participate in Roman pagan worship and the immorality so prevalent at that time. Peter is writing to encourage them, but he doesn’t just tell them what to do; he first reminds them and us of who we are. Who we are, says Peter, is rooted in the resurrection of Christ – because of the resurrection those of us who have placed our faith in Christ have experienced new birth, and what I’d like to look at today is what this new birth is and what it means for us.

Peter says God has given us a new birth/we have been born again – this is a tricky word. For some in the church “born again” has become a badge of honor and is used in an almost elitist way that implies many in the church aren’t really Christians. And for those of us on the other side it has become a pejorative term – like a friend of mine with whom I interned at the Jefferson hospital who said repeatedly, “I hate born agains”. Not all of us are that vehement, but we do view “born agains” with suspicion. But the point is not whether we know the moment in time when we believed, the point is that we do believe in Christ, and that we understand what that means for us both in terms of who we are and how we live. We need to note that our new birth is the work of God the Father who takes the initiative – we have nothing to do with it, just as we had nothing to do with our human birth. It is also an act of mercy – new birth is not what we deserve.

So why do we need a new birth?

Because of sin. Sin affects us at the very core of our being, what the Bible refers to as our heart. This is not referring to the pump in our chest, but it is the ‘real’ me, the inner person, my spiritual self, what makes me tick. We are created to live in trusting dependence on God. Sin leads us to believe that we can find life away from God and so instead of listening to God and obeying him, our natural inclination is to serve our own interests and desires. We’re a bit like 2-year olds – our favorite words are no and mine. We’re a lot more subtle and sophisticated than 2-year olds, at least some of the time, but in essence we say no to God’s kingship and instead put ourselves on the throne of our lives – it’s my life, my money, my body, my time, my career. God wants us to follow him wholeheartedly, to allow him to be on the throne of our lives, but the only way that can happen is for God to give us a new heart, new motivation, a desire to love and serve him instead of ourselves. Our OT reading tells us that this is exactly what God promised to do, it describes a time when God will cleanse his people and give them a new heart and a new spirit. God will give them a heart of flesh, teachable

and malleable, instead of their stubborn, unyielding heart of stone that insists on its own way. The Spirit in them will cause them to listen to God and obey him, so that they will live as God intended them to live in a trusting relationship to their King.

How does the new birth happen?

Christ's birth, death, and particularly his resurrection from the dead initiated this time about which Ezekiel prophesied, the age of the renewal of God's creation and the restoration of God's kingship over all of creation. This was the time Peter tells us that the prophets told about and longed to see but could not. When Christ was resurrected by the power of God's Spirit, the life of the age to come was breaking in to the present. The cosmic rebirth that we as Christians anticipate in the future has already begun. When we put our faith in Christ that resurrection life becomes our life, renewing us and giving us a new heart. The founding fathers thought they were beginning the world anew, and in one sense I suppose they were, but the resurrection of Christ represents the ultimate new beginning, both for us and for all creation. That doesn't mean we are perfect – it means we have to recognize who we are and work to live out of our new identity instead of our old one. Peter goes on in the rest of the book to instruct us on what that might look like, how we can become who we already are.

In terms of the future the new birth means we have a living hope - because Christ lives, we too live now and will live in the future. This is not a hope against hope, a hope that if I'm good enough I'll make it, as though we really have to stand at the pearly gates and give St. Peter three reasons why he should let us into heaven. It's not a hope that because of my looks, job, money, education, talent or anything else that I will be okay. It is a sure hope anchored firmly in the resurrection of Christ.

It also means we have an inheritance that is untouched by death, unstained by evil, unspoiled by time. A recent article on the Motley Fool webpage, an investing site, gives advice to those who are waiting for an inheritance. They recommend that even though you may be salivating over the prospect of an instant college fund, a lush retirement, or a plain-ole' giant pile of disposable cash, you would be wise not to count your inheritance before you have it. Even if you have a promise from a relative, there are a few obstacles that might get in the way, including timing – Grandma may live longer than you think which means she'll also spend more on expensive medical costs; volatility – Grandma may have invested in Bear Stearns; restrictions – Grandpa's will may state that you have to pay off your credit cards before you get his bequest; and human nature – Grandpa may run off and marry a lady friend in the nursing home to whom he might leave everything. The inheritance God has for us is not subject to bad timing, volatility, restrictions, or human nature. It is being kept in heaven and is our full salvation that is complete now and will be fully realized when Christ returns.

For the present our new birth means that not only is our inheritance being kept, but we too, the heirs, are being kept by the power of God through faith, until Christ returns. But Peter tells us that as people who live out of our new identity, our faith is tested – now if you are anything like me, as soon as you hear the word test you think pass/fail and start to feel pressure and fear. But this is not the kind of testing Peter is talking about. If our faith is going to trust in God's ability and power to keep us to the end, it must be purified. This happens through trials. These are trials that come as we struggle to live out of our new identity, as we seek to serve and obey God. What might that look like for us as 21st C Christians? The idea that it is better to suffer perceived unfulfilled needs and desires than to sin is not a value that is esteemed in our culture. Our culture says "If it feels good, do it", "You deserve to be happy". So many in our culture pursue Hedonism instead of the values of sacrifice and service. If we say no to these values it means that we will probably feel like square pegs in round holes, we just don't quite fit. Peter compares these trials that purify our faith to the refining of gold, which is the most valuable and permanent substance in his and our world. The refining process does not destroy the gold, it only removes the impurities. We ought to expect trials to come that will burn away self-confidence and trust in anything but God, so that what is left is genuine or pure faith that trusts in God's goodness and faithfulness. And that genuine faith will endure the final judgment, bringing glory, honor, and praise to God.

The resurrection is much more than an event that we remember and celebrate once a year. Through the work of the Spirit God has already begun the work of re-creation. I hope you caught the mood of joy in these verses. We have great cause to rejoice – through the resurrection of Christ God has given us new birth, a living hope, a sure inheritance, and he is keeping us by faith – faith that is being refined and purified. We have been reborn into something much bigger than ourselves, much bigger than our personal happiness and fulfillment. We've become participants in God's great story of redemption. As I seek to live out of my new identity, I am saying no to a lot of things I had planned on doing at this point in my life. This is a time when I thought I would be focused on grandchildren, golf and travel. But I cannot escape the

conviction that God has called me to serve you. Some of you when you hear this might think that is okay for her, she is called to be a minister. But I want you to know that the call of resurrection life is on everyone in this room. It doesn't matter whether you're young or old, male or female, "born again" or always a believer. The resurrection is not an arid theological concept, it is a reality that touches every nook and cranny of your life.

Augustine, a 4<sup>th</sup> century church father, said, "The glory of God is human beings fully alive". We will not be fully alive until Christ returns, but in the meantime may we daily seek to live out of our new identity that is ours because of Christ's resurrection.