

"ANOTHER FIRST IN THE LIFE OF JESUS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Thus far in Lent this year we have thought about the first temptation of Jesus, and we have reviewed the first sermon that He preached, and then last Sunday we quietly reflected upon the first of the miracles that He performed. Today, on this the Fourth Sunday of Lent, we shall look at the story of Nicodemus which introduces us to the first dialogue in which He was engaged and recorded for us in the Gospel of John.

Let me say this here at the beginning. The Gospel of John wants you to see that the coming of Christ into our world means that all things are new. It's like a new beginning for everybody. For everybody, that is, who sees what is happening and who acts on it. John starts with Nicodemus to show us that the coming of Jesus into our world is for those who have gotten all that this world offers and discovers that it's not enough.

DEVELOPMENT

Myron Cohen, one of those Catskill comedians who delivers jokes in rapid fire manner, recently told the story of two garment workers here in our city who worked side by side for years in the same Seventh Avenue factory - one a cutter and the other a stitcher. One day not too long ago they got talking about vacations. One of them said, "I'm not going to take a vacation this year". The other said, "And why not?" He said "Because I went on a vacation last year to Africa, went on a safari, hunting elephants, and one of the elephants charged me. My gun jammed and the elephant... the elephant killed me". The other man said, "What are you talking about? You weren't killed...you ain't dead. You're sitting here...living". He said, "You call this living?"

Someone has said that the goal of psychoanalysis is to move a person from "hysterical misery to common unhappiness". I wonder. Is that what it's like to be normal? I don't think so. I believe that God has created us for something more than "common unhappiness", that He has created us for joyful and abundant living.

BACK TO NICODEMUS

Back to Nicodemus and the conversation He had with Jesus. I wonder if Nicodemus had reached that point in his life where things were beginning to fall apart, when in the words of Yeat's famous poem, "The center will not hold" and things fly apart. When what you counted on, what you built as a foundation, what you put your dreams on no longer produces or is able to give you fulfillment, and satisfaction in life.

Nicodemus lived in Jerusalem. He was a respected member of the Sanhedrin. In every country there is a city in which power is concentrated and within that city itself there is a further concentration of influence called the elite, what we call "the shakers and the movers". Nicodemus was to be found in that group. He was a powerful and successful man in his society. He had everything. I used to wonder why anyone like Nicodemus would ever go to Jesus and now I think I know. Apparently he had reached that point in his life when you begin to realize that what you have is not enough, and to get more only somehow deepens the emptiness. And this, I feel, can happen at any point in life.

MORE OF HIS STORY

The story of Nicodemus is in John's Gospel. The other three Gospels say that Jesus went to Jerusalem just once, at the end of His life, on Palm Sunday. But John has a different chronology.

John says He went there twice - on Palm Sunday at the end of the last week of His life, and also at the beginning of His ministry to cleanse the Temple... kicking out the money changers and knocking over the tables, sending everybody scurrying for cover in the narthex, making outrageous statements, such as the life had gone out of the Temple, its customs and rituals hollow and empty, even daring to suggest that you could get rid of the Temple and nobody would ever miss it. And then speaking metaphorically and saying that He had come to be the New Temple and if people wanted new life they should come to Him.

It doesn't take much imagination to imagine the kind of talk that went on the next evening in the Sanhedrin about this man who had come to town from Galilee to claim so much. Nicodemus was there in the Sanhedrin. Maybe he even joined in the condemnation of this Prophet from upstate. The meeting adjourned and Nicodemus started hom. Only he found himself moving in another direction, going to another place, heading out toward Bethany where it was rumored that this man was spending the night. Like Wesley in 18th century London, going to the Evening Prayer Service in the Cathedral, when leaving...intending to go home, but finding, as he later put it, "almost against my will", being led to Aldersgate Street and to the meeting of the Moravians where he heard them read Luther's Preface to Paul's Letter to the Romans, and "felt his heart strangely warmed." It was Wesley's honesty about the emptiness in his life that prepared the way for him to be led by the Spirit.

And it was the same kind of honesty and openness, I believe, that led Nicodemus that night on a path he never though he would ever take...to visit Jesus and to ask Him, "How can I find new life?" And Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you...unless one is born anew he cannot see the Kingdom of God". And then the question of Nicodemus, "How can a man be born when he is old?"

Jesus answers him with these words, "Truly, truly I say to you...unless one of born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God". And then He adds, "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know when it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the spirit". And that text you recognize has come to be of great importance to many Christians in our time - sort of a benchmark of what it means to them to be Christian. It's the source of the term, "Being born again", so popular in our time.

So we do well to examine it rather closely. I would point out to you that this is the only place in the New Testament where that term appears. It's only to Nicodemus that Jesus said, "You must be born again". To other people He said different things. To the rich young ruler He said, "You must sell all that you have and give to the poor". To other people He said, "Why don't you just stand up and walk?" To others He said, "You are forgiven...go and sin no more". And still to others He said, "Drop what you are doing and follow Me".

But to Nicodemus He said, "You must be born again". I wonder...would Jesus have said the same to you? Or, something different. That's interesting to think about.

TO BE BORN AGAIN

Now what it means to be "born again" is to be found in the formula, "Unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God".

To be born of water certainly refers to Baptism and baptism both then and now means starting over - a fresh beginning...beginning with a frank recognition of the mistakes that I have made in my life. Beginning with the honest admission that my life is not the way I want it to be, and I want it to be better than it now is. That's what baptism means. There's a kind of honesty that says the problem that I've lived with all these years is not going to go away. I have assumed that some day it's going to go away, or I have assumed that some day I'm going to be able to handle this. But now I admit honestly, it has a strong hold on me and I need help if I'm going to get a hold on it. That kind of honesty is needed.

Or, the honesty that says my defensiveness, my insisting on my having my own way, or insisting on my own recognition to the point where I put down other people all the time - my anger, the bitterness in my life...all of that is unseemly, and it's embarrassing to me and it makes me miserable and I want to end living that way. I want to live this life with joy, not resentment all the time; happiness and not bitterness and anger. I want to be free of the need to put other people down all the time. That kind of honesty, and I don't know of anybody who has ever received a new life who didn't begin with honesty about the life he or she was living.

That's what being born of water means. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it's called "repentance" - which means turning around, going in a different direction, beginning again. But in John's Gospel it's called being born of water. It's a gift, but I believe we have a part in it. If there's anything that you can do yourself to begin again, it's be honest about the life you're living. If you've tried to rid yourself of the habits or those nagging characteristics that you do not like in your own life and that makes you dislike yourself, even hate yourself, but you can't do anything about it, then be honest about it - like Nicodemus.

It may mean that you seek out a counsellor and spill it all out and that would be all right. It may mean that you come to Church and speak to a minister. That may be enough, just as a kind of confession...tell somebody whom you trust how you really feel about your life and how you'd like to begin again. It may mean that you do it privately. It may mean that you come to Church and receive communion and hear the words of the Invitation, "Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins and intend to lead a new life..." And you hear that invitation, not just words thrown out over a congregation, but as the invitation that is beamed at your heart directly and personally.

Whatever it is, and however it happens, honesty is the first step in being born anew.

IT COMES AS A GIFT

And then the second lesson from our text today is that it comes by the Spirit, and the key to understanding that is the word or line, "The spirit blows where it wills"...which means you don't know how it is going to happen or when it is going to happen. It comes as a gift and all you can do is be ready for it. I'm always amazed at the variety of ways the Spirit works in the lives of people. And let me add this. It will most often come through the influence of another person's life, in ways that the other person won't even be aware of...through what that person says or what that person does, they are given a new direction in life. That's a gift of the Spirit.

It may happen like this. Frederick Buechner, the novelist, down in the dumps here in the city, not happy with his life at all. He felt drawn to Church one Sunday. He hadn't gone very much before, but all of a sudden he started to go to the Church down the street from where he lived in the East seventies. He just walked in the Church one Sunday morning; it was Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. He heard the great preacher, George Buttrick, preach and it turned his life around. And the amazing thing about it was that he says he heard Buttrick say something that Sunday in his sermon that changed his life, but he went back to the sermon and couldn't find the sentence in the sermon that he heard and which turned him in a different direction. You see, somebody does something and the Spirit takes it and uses it to change a life. And the person who is the agent of the spirit isn't even aware of it. "The spirit blows where it wills".

Or, Alec Guinness, one of the most celebrated actors in our time, tells of the time when he came to a similar point in his life. He was feeling down and empty about twenty-five years ago. He was filming a movie in France, playing the role of a priest. He was living in a residence about a mile away from the spot where they were filming, so he had to dress there and walk over to the filming site. He went there late one afternoon and was told that he wouldn't be needed for another four hours and so he started to walk back. He was wearing the cassock of the priest. As he was walking back it began to get dark. He heard footsteps and when he turned around he saw that a little boy of seven or eight years of age had been following him. Then the boy came forward and took the hand of Alec Guinness. Guinness said:

"I was not a familiar figure to him. He knew that I wasn't his priest, but he took my hand and held it all the way till we got to the bottom of the hill. And suddenly he said, 'Bon Soir'...and disappeared.

And Guinness who had been an atheist, commented,

"I changed my attitude at that very moment. I thought a religion that can provide whoever is wearing that particular robe an air of comfort and security so that a little child can come up to him as a stranger and take his hand and know that he will be completely safe, has more to it than I would ever credit it."

From that time on he was drawn to the Church. He said he went from priest to priest on his search and then finally made his conversion to Catholicism. And for the last five years he and his wife have been regular communicants in the Church.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

The new birth is of water - like a baptism. It's a letting go of the past and that's your part. And it's of the spirit - a gift, a surprise, even...and that is God's part.

You may wonder, as I have often wondered, whatever happened to Nicodemus. We don't know for sure if he ever received the gift of new life, but I'd like to think he did. For one thing, there are two other instances in the Gospel of John where Nicodemus is mentioned. One is about in the middle of the Gospel when Jesus is in trouble and people are talking about Him and they want to

arrest Him and punish Him and He's being discussed in the Sanhedrin. In that debate one lone voice is raised in defense of Jesus - just one. It was the voice of Nicodemus. He says, "Does our law pass judgment on a man before it gives him a hearing?" And that's all it took to prevent an arrest at that time.

And then at the end of the Gospel, John mentions that Joseph of Arimathea took the body of our Lord and put it in a tomb. And almost as an aside in that passage, it says, there was a man there named Nicodemus who came with Joseph and brought oil and ointment for the burial. That's what you do for family, or for a dear friend.

I don't know what eventually happened to Nicodemus, but the evidence is there that because he came to Jesus when He was down in the doldrums, when he found life to be empty, He couldn't leave Him and neither did Jesus leave Nicodemus. And if that happens, in time the Spirit will blow and you will be born anew.

PRAYER

Move in our lives, O God, and make us deeply sensitive to Your presence and nearness. Come to us. Lift us and fill what is empty and confirm what is strong, so that we - like Nicodemus - may depart renewed, refreshed and on our feet...ready to take hold of the joy and the happiness that is there for us in each day. In the name and spirit of Christ, our Teacher, we pray. Amen

INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. The day of rest is at hand.

May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life and may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding presence. In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people, saith your God. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms."

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us."

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: we are forgiven."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing... you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole"

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Comfort the bereaved and the broken-hearted among us. Abide among us as a healing benediction.

Answer the unspoken prayers offered to You on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

1. Ray Barnes
2. Paul Kilborn

3. Frank High, death of brother, Walter
- 4.

PASTORAL PRAYER: July 13, 1986

HELP US, O GOD, in these quiet moments this morning to concentrate on You with faith and in hope.

REMOVE the lethargy from our spirits,
the doubt from our minds,
the coldness from our hearts.

REKINDLE our faith. Help it to be more adventurous.

REVIVE within each of us the confidence that You do hear and do answer prayer...and that "more things are wrought by prayer than this world has ever dreamed."

WE WOULD THINK of those who in the slowness of these hot, muggy days of a Summer in this city amid the perplexities of city life are searching for YOU.

MAKE YOURSELF known to us in our joys and in our disappointments.

MAKE YOURSELF known to us in the traffic of the weekday and the business of the world.

MAKE YOURSELF known to us in the hush of prayer, in the music of this service, in the preaching of Your Word.
Bless her who delivers Your word this hour.

BE KNOWN TO US as the friend of the lonely,
the strength of the weak,
the healer of the perplexed,
the comforter of the bereaved.

AND HELP THOSE OF US who trust completely in You to be now and always "agents" of Your way and "ambassadors" of Your love -

Pure in thought, gracious in our speech, courageous in our action, responsible in our relationships, generous in our giving.

Use us Lord - wherever we are called - to serve the cause of peace, of justice and goodwill among the people of the world.

Remind us that we cannot fellowship with You, if in our hearts we reject or neglect our brother who is in need. Take us and use us to carve Your will in the world where we live and work.

We pray for the person sitting near us in the pew this hour.

Finally, grant to each of us that measure of peace and inner quietness that comes to those whose minds are focussed on You - that measure of peace that passes all human understanding. In the name and spirit of Christ we pray this day.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, July 13, 1986

GREETING / VISITORS Even on a warm Summer Sunday a NYC Church can be "blessed" with the presence of visiting friends. I sense and see that today is no exception!

A word of welcome then to the visitors in today's congregation. We're delighted to have you with us and we do hope that we shall have the opportunity to greet you personally before you depart...either at the door following the service, or time permitting...downstairs in the Russell Room where punch and cookies will be served.

Let me add this word about the Church. Its roots are deep in the soil of this city...it's a Church that has been ministering here to the needs of others since 1837. We celebrate our 150th anniversary birthday next year. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His name and in His loving spirit that we bid you welcome on this July Sunday morning in the year 1984!

TODAY'S MUSIC A word about today's music. We welcome Michael D. Reed to the organ console in the absence of Lyndon Woodside. Michael's talents and gifts have become known to us in recent Summer Sundays. This is his 8th Summer with us and it's always a joy to have him. He brings new sounds and a great lift to some of those great hymns of our Faith.

And we welcome Barbara Hairston, a member of our congregation, as our soloist today. Barbara has blessed many of our Summer services with her voice and we are grateful to her for sharing in the service this morning. Thank you, Barbara.

THIS WEEK Be sure to pick up a copy of our July issue of our monthly news sheet. Copies are by the door as well as downstairs on the table.

You'll note from the Word in Edgeways that the Adult Fellowship is sponsoring a "Strawberry Festival Dinner" this coming Thursday evening, July 17th. Bob Gardner has the details for it. It's to be held on the church roof and we'll come together around six O'clock on the roof.

Also, remember that the "Hounds of Heaven" meets on Tuesday night at 6:30 in Fellowship Hall. It's a good time to join as a new book is being presented for study.

And looking ahead, members of the Finance Committee are reminded of a meeting set for Thursday, July 24th - a week from Thursday - at the apartment home of Kathy Buck.

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TODAY'S PREACHER

How good to have William Proctor back with us once again...it's like old times...and we greet Bill, his wife, Pam, and their son, Michael.

William Proctor is a friend to many of us. Let me tell you a bit about him:

- a native of Georgia
- reared in Texas
- Schooled at Harvard
- Law Degree at Harvard.
- Judge Advocate, Marine Corps, Vietnam...late 1960's.
- Reporter (Legal), Daily News...early seventies.
- author of 15 books plus on religious themes.
- Former Trustee, Lay Leader, PAMC. Friend...Adult Bible Class

We welcome you back, Bill...and look forward to your message to us today. I chose the 2nd hymn on the basis that it is one of your favorite hymns. You're one of our favorite people, Bill, and it warms our hearts to have you back with us this morning.

AWAY LAST SUNDAY

I missed you all last Sunday. I was invited to preach at the Caroga Lake Evangelical Chapel up in the foothills of the Adirondacks...not far from Johnstown and Gloversville where I lived as a boy...we had a good service...a full chapel and an opportunity to meet many dear friends from 40 years ago...high school friends...friends, too, from my home church in Gloversville.

They offered me a cottage for 10 days which I thoroughly enjoyed...a chance to rest and relax and unwind...it was a good break! A most enjoyable time.

OFFERING

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God...