

"WHEN YOU'RE IN THE DOLDRUMS"

A sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
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New York, New York 10028  
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### INTRODUCTION

Myron Cohen is one of those Catskill comedians who delivers jokes in a rapid fire barrage. They're Jewish ethnic stories mainly. He 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 they got talking about vacations. One of them said, "I'm not going to take a vacation this year". The other said, "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 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?"

Humor is a life preserver. It enables us to live in intolerable situations. But not all of us have that: the humor, that is. All of us know those intolerable situations. And if we don't now, some day we will.

### DEVELOPMENT

I was reading an article in a magazine this Summer; it was a critique, you might say, of Freudian psychoanalysis. From what I gather, it's now Freud's turn to be knocked off the pedestal. This article said that the goal of modern Freudian psychoanalysis is to move the patient from "hysterical misery to common unhappiness". That was the line that really caught my attention. From "hysterical misery to common unhappiness".

I wonder...is that what it's like to be normal? I don't think so. I find that difficult to accept. For I believe that God has created us for something more than common unhappiness, that He has created us for joyful and abundant and triumphant living - not for unhappiness. Or, have you settled for that in your life? Have you come to a certain point in your life, looked at your situation, what you have put up with up to this point in your life and what you see as the prospect for you in the future, and settle now for common unhappiness?

A number of years ago I got an invitation to attend my High School Class Reunion, No. 35. It had a grim kind of slogan on the letterhead of the invitation. It was a sort of a theme for the reunion. It said, "Getting together to see who's falling apart". I didn't get to attend.

That's Myron Cohen humor. An attempt to laugh at the fact that in this world at any age you can expect things to fall apart. Dreams have failed and hopes are vanishing and truces have begun to be made with life. That reunion sounded to me like it was the reunion of the survivors of some war.

### NICODEMUS

Now I wonder if Nicodemus had reached that point in his life when things were beginning to fall apart, when in the words of Yeats' 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.

I think this happens to those who fulfill the goals they have in life. Those who don't fulfill their goals in life probably continue to dream, or they continue to fantasize, and that hides them from the reality of it, or it compels them to keep on trying. But those who reach their goals in this life realize that what they have is not really enough. I think that Nicodemus must have been that way. Let me tell you more about him.

We know he was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a combination City Council and Supreme Court. They were the recognized leaders of the community and Nicodemus was one of them. He was also materially successful. He was a man of substance, he could afford to live comfortably, a member of the "elite". He also had a substantial reputation. I used to wonder why anyone like Nicodemus...so successful in this world...would ever go to Jesus. He had everything. 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 think, can happen at any point in life.

#### MORE OF HIS STORY

The story of Nicodemus is in the Gospel of John. 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. Can you imagine somebody saying that? It's outrageous.

And 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 Galilee. The meeting adjourned and Nicodemus started home. 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 John Wesley in 18th Century London, going to the Evening Prayer Service in the Cathedral, when leaving... intending to go home, but finding, as he 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 thought 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 is 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...interesting to think about.

LOOK AT IT CLOSELY      Let's look at it. 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 is now. 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 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, 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 that he 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 go to a counselor 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 addressed to you 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 this text 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's going to happen, or when it's going to happen. It comes as a gift and all you can do is to be ready for it. I'm amazed at the variety of ways the Spirit works in the lives of individuals. But I 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, in the doldrums living here in this 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 "in the doldrums" 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

It's "amazing" - the variety of ways the Spirit works in a life, in your life. It "blows where it wills..." However it happens and whenever it happens, no matter how it happens, there is one thing that everyone who has ever experienced it testifies to, and that is, it is nothing that you did. It is a gift. As John put it, "It comes from above". It's not the result of what you do; it's a gift. It often comes when you're not looking. And I'm here to remind you that it often comes when you have assumed it will not come at all.

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. That is God's part.

You may wonder, as I often have, 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 to 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 Nicodemus. He said, "Does our law pass judgement 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 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...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. Fill what is empty and confirm what is strong, so that we - like Nicodemus...if we are down and in the doldrums of life, may depart from here renewed, refreshed, on our feet and ready to take hold of the joy and happiness that is there for us in each day. In the name and spirit of Christ, our Teacher. We pray.