

17 February, 2008
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Well, it's good to be back with you after a couple of weeks away. We were in New Orleans for about 8 days. There was a team of us from here who stayed at the Homecoming Center at St. Paul's Church in the Lakeview neighborhood and spent our time rebuilding houses. I have a lot to say about that experience, as will others who went. I think it stirred us up.

But I'm not going to talk about it now. You have to come to the Annual Meeting. Because we'll have some pictures, several of us will talk about it and it'll be a real opportunity because it really does, it stirs things up. It's a very complex issue there, it would be really nice to be able to make it very simplistic, but it's extremely complex. So I hope that you'll come to the meeting if for no other reason than to hear a good report or if you even mention it anywhere outside the pulpit, I'll probably talk your arm off about it.

The gospel today is not completely divorced from some of what came out of that experience. We hear in this story from the gospel of John. This very famous story of Nicodemus who was a rabbi who comes under cover of darkness and symbolically, since most of John is so symbolic in it's language, that Nicodemus has to come to Jesus under cover of darkness says something about the state of Nicodemus at that point.

He comes to Jesus, he wants something. He doesn't even get a chance to really ask a question, though. He acknowledges Jesus as rabbi, as he himself is a rabbi, a teacher. And he says, "No one can do the signs that you do apart from the presence of God." And that's one of the last things he gets to say.

Then Jesus launches into this very mind-boggling statement about how no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Some translations say born again. And poor Nicodemus is so bum-fuzzled by this whole notion – what do you mean? And Jesus doesn't do a lot to change that. But he talks about how one must be transformed and that this seems to be the real focus.

This is early in the gospel of John, and John's gospel is seen by many as a manual for the transformative journey. And certainly here, this is the third chapter of John; this is early on establishing that this is what we're about. New life. Being changed. Being transformed. Being born again, born from above.

Now, he does try to clarify again by saying, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh." Fine. We've established that. You're standing here in front of me, we have established the fact that you were born in the flesh. But he's talking about being born in the spirit. Having that spiritual aspect of his life generated. Opened up. Cracked open. The doors opened to the life of the spirit. Which is something more than merely walking around with a functional brain and brain stem and body. It's present in all of us. It's not

something that comes in from the outside. It's something that's present in all of us, but it activated, you might say, by something.

Well now, many of us would say that you have to have a particular **POW**, explosive experience, an emotional landmark where you were one thing up to here and then from there on you're something completely different. And there are those within Christendom who say you're not even "saved" (whatever that means) unless you've had one of these particular sorts of experiences. And it's interesting: It's all people who've had those experiences who define it that way. Isn't that interesting?

I can point to a place in my life where I had one of those experiences. It, as we say, blew my doors off. Completely. Ripped open. And my life was very different from that moment on.

But I know many, many people of profound spiritual maturity who have never had one of those experiences. Not like that. But have been slowly, over the course of a lifetime, stewing, you might say. Stewing in God's own juices so that at some point, upon looking back, realize –wow– more has happened here than simply a passage of time. There has been transformation and maturity and it's not just from getting old.

Those experiences, while not nearly so dramatic, are equally valid. Some people's births – rebirths, you might say – have been very dramatic and notable. But others have had this long, slow birth.

Whether it comes dramatically or slowly, I daresay it's really an opportunity. It's not a done deal. It's also not about whether you get to heaven when you die or not. I don't think very much about what Jesus was talking about had to do with what happens when you die. What he's talking about, the Kingdom of God, he's not talking about the afterlife, except that the afterlife is a continuation of what happens here. The kingdom of God, in my way of thinking – when Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God, he's talking about a state of being that we can experience here in this life and that he is the most profound example in this tradition of that way of being.

Unrestricted, unbound, he says... When he's talking about where the wind blows, where it comes from. The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. It's unrestricted, it's unbound. And if there were any words we could use to describe Jesus, they are unrestricted and unbound. And it's that level of liberation, that level of freedom, unrestricted and unbound, that is the kingdom of God.

It's that profound liberation that we see as expressed in Jesus, bound only by love. Guided only by love. Not fear, not rigidity, not anger, but bound only by love. That is the kingdom of God. And that carries on, that sets up a momentum, sets up a pattern.

So, at the point at which we leave behind this body, we merely continue in the kingdom of God. We merely continue in the momentum that we have established here for further

growth and transformation. An opportunity, then, in this life, to open the doors for that level of transformation.

One of the things that I saw in New Orleans was an opportunity that seems to be lost. In many ways you could say that New Orleans went through a born again experience. The old way was just wiped out. And many of the good things about New Orleans are being held onto and are possessing some sort of a spark and a zeal and a zest that might not be there had they not been through what they've been through in the last few years.

But there are some things that it's the same old used-to-be. Politics is still a cesspool. And people are being used and manipulated and circumstances are being used and manipulated for political ends. The school system is still a mess. And those things are not changing.

So just because we have the opportunity for transformation doesn't mean that we're actually going to be transformed. How often have you been near someone who's had one of these explosive Damascus-Road experiences and five years later it's like it never happened? Somewhere along the line, that opportunity is lost. Something else got in the way. Something else took precedence over that open door.

Jesus here is speaking of the gift that's being held out. We need not wait for the dramatic experience. We can begin at any point. The whole season of Lent is like a focused time, a symbol of the spiritual life. Not just about beating ourselves up and not eating chocolate, but that whole process of looking at ourselves, of letting that open door invite in an experience. New life. New and unending life.

And how it looks for any one of us is going to be unique to that person because of that own unique personal circumstance. But the opportunity is there for all of us. Is it an accident that the end of Lent, the end of this season of self-reflection is the celebration of new birth? Of new life, at Easter?

Do not underestimate the ancients. There is profundity there. There is wisdom there. And if we fail to grasp that opportunity, it's always there. We can always take that turn. We don't have to wait for next year's Lent if you miss it this year. But the opportunity to truly engage in this process of becoming – becoming anew, being born of the spirit, it's always there.

Amen.