

Sermon, Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma CA  
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by Jack Dison

John 3: 1-17

An important aspect of Lent is taking stock of ourselves and our institutions so that we can go deeper into spiritual experience and growth as we move with Jesus in his archetypal journey to Jerusalem. In doing so it is important to recognize those elements of our individual and collective life where enduring changes in habits and practices of the heart can take us closer to God and closer to the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus in his ministry. We find a rather firm invitation to that self reflection and work in today's gospel reading.

We don't really know what it was that Nicodemus, the Pharisee, came to speak with Jesus about as he came to him in the night.

We know what his brief first comment to Jesus was. Let me paraphrase: "Jesus, we are so impressed with your teaching and we have concluded that you really are from God. Wow, those signs you do are amazing; obviously they could not be done apart from God's presence."

I wonder what it was that Nicodemus had on his mind. Did he want to get something that Jesus said clarified? Did he want to ask for healing? Did he want to ask for a favor? Was he curious and wanted to learn more about what Jesus was proclaiming? Did he want to warn Jesus? Did he want to explore an alliance? Did he want to argue a point with Jesus?

We'll never know because Jesus promptly took control of the conversation and sent it in an entirely different direction.

This was not a mild mannered, nice, and easily approachable Jesus. Had that been the case, Jesus might have replied to Nicodemus saying something like "That's very good and wise of you to recognize my connection with God and to see the implications of that for what I am doing."

No, Jesus came off here more like a cranky graduate school professor who is impatient with the fact that the person before him, who should know better, is missing the point and way off track when it comes to understanding what is important.

Jesus, seemingly not interested in pursuing conversation about his link with divinity, creates a huge turn in the conversation by saying to Nicodemus "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being "born again." . . . or as it is often translated "being reborn" or "born from above."

Then Nicodemus steps up to the plate and demonstrates that indeed he has no clue what Jesus is talking about. Nicodemus questions Jesus. Again I paraphrase: “Man, what are you talking about? A big man cannot get back into his mother’s womb and go through the birth process again! That’s physiologically impossible!”

The scripture does not record it, but I can’t help but wonder if Jesus at this point is muttering to himself something like “Oh my! This guy doesn’t know a metaphor from his left buttock.”

Instead, the scripture reports that Jesus repeats the point, hoping that Nicodemus can absorb it this time. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Then Jesus elaborates a bit.

Nicodemus, ever on his march to the bottom of the class responds. I imagine him scratching his head as he says “How can these things be?”

Jesus, no longer able to contain his impatience, responds “Are you a teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things? And a little later Jesus adds “If you don’t understand what I tell you of earthly things, how can you understand when I tell you of heavenly things?”

I hope Jesus will not jump down my throat if I have this wrong, (PLEASE, Jesus, don’t do that not in front of all these nice people!), but I think the point that Jesus is trying to get across is that Nicodemus, and all of us, need a spiritual rebirth, an internal rebirth, a personal transformation.

The New Testament scholar Marcus Borg tells us the phrase “born again” is found only one more time in the New Testament. (I love Borg’s interpretation of the theme of being born anew, and much of what I present here is based on his teaching and writing, and even his own words, on this topic.) But, he writes, the same notion – the notion of being born anew - is frequently expressed in the language of dying and rising, of death and resurrection. And of course this is a major focus for us in the season of Lent – to anticipate what this whole journey calling us to transformation, calling us to death and rebirth, is about.

I do not need to tell you that some who use this language, reporting that they have been transformed or “born again” use it in a very superficial and shallow way.

To be transformed involves death and resurrection. It means dying to an old way of being, and being born to a new way of being, dying to an old identity and being born to a new identity – a way of being and an identity centered in the sacred, in Spirit, in Christ, in God. In the gospels and in the rest of the New Testament, death and resurrection, dying and rising, are again and again a metaphor for personal transformation.

The theme of death and resurrection is clear in the Gospels. Let me mention one clear transformational, rebirth statement found in the gospel of Mark: Jesus says “Those who

want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” Again, dying to an old identity and being born to a new identity.

Paul’s letters, again and again speak of transformation in terms of dying and rising with Jesus. He uses the metaphor to speak of his own experience of transformation. In his letter to the Christian community at Galatia, Paul states “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” He is referring to a Big Transformation. The old Paul is dead and a new Paul has been born, one in whom Christ lives.

The way of the cross, on which we reflect for the next weeks of Lent and through the drama of Easter, involves dying and being born into a new chapter of life, dying to an old way of being and being raised to a new way of being, one centered in God.

Some of you know that I do quite a lot of prison and other criminal justice ministry. In that capacity I get to work with men and women who want to make changes in their lives. Many of them are passionate about making a transformation. Often they say something like “My old way of life is not working, I am sick and tired of it and I want to move on to a new way of living.” Thus I get to see and hear and experience up close some dramatic life transformation stories as they unfold.

I’m sure lots of folks are pretty skeptical of these “jailhouse conversions” and I share that skepticism, but in many cases incarcerated persons have reached a very low point in life, what is called in 12 step language “a low bottom.” Many of them are ready and highly motivated to experience a life change, and are willing to take the risks in doing so and are willing to make the investments of time and self in seeing that it comes about. I can tell you that when that happens, it really is quite a remarkable thing to see.

Not long ago I asked a group of men in prison that I work with to share ways in which they had experienced going from being dead to coming back to life. Some described near death medical events they had survived. Several explained that when they came to prison they were into life patterns and thinking that kept them near death if not already dead. One told the group that eventually he got tired of being the “tough guy,” who was always in control. I’ll quote him here as best I can recall what he said: “It no longer worked for me. But I did not see any alternative. It seemed to me that the best way to go would be to die. I got involved in incidents which would prompt a tower guard to shoot me, but that never happened. “Later,” he explained, “I got stabbed and was hoping that I would die, but I recovered. Then I found my way to those who had learned a new way of living. Most of those were hanging around the chapel. I started hanging out with them I have made a big turnaround in my life. Of course I am still in prison and will be for a long time – probably for the rest of my life, but life is very different for me now, and I have a lot to live for. I really was dead, but not any more.”

It reminded me of the language of the father in the prodigal son story. “My son who was dead, is now alive.”

Why do we need this transformation? Why do we need to be reborn, “born from above”? You already know this. If you don’t, I’ll try to break it to you gently. It is the nature of the beast, we of course being the beasts. It is part of the human experience, part of the drama of human existence that we move into separation and alienation: alienation from ourselves, from others, and of course from God. To be reborn in this context is to move away from alienation to unity with self, God, and others.

Part of that alienation comes from what we learn in our culture. I suppose the central messages of this culture could be something like “love God with all your heart and all you have, and love your neighbor – including those you designate as enemies.” But let’s face it that is not the central message of this world. Much of what we learn in the socialization process centers around how we measure up to others through criteria such as appearance, achievement, and affluence. Attention and priority given to those often separate us from others, and from ourselves and from the One who created us. We live our lives in relation to what Thomas Keating calls “the false self,” the self created and conferred by the culture. Or, to use language from Frederick Buechner, we live our lives from the outside in rather than from the inside out.

Our fall into exile can be and often is very deep. The biblical picture of the human condition is bleak. Separated and self-concerned, the self becomes blind, self-preoccupied, prideful; worry filled, grasping, miserable; insensitive, angry, violent.

Let me recognize that this point can be overstated. Clearly there are a great many good things which humans do both individually and collectively.

But Borg points out to me, and to other readers and students, that the biblical vision of our amazing contradiction is that we are created in the image of God, but we often live our lives outside of paradise, “east of Eden,” in a world of estrangement and self-preoccupation.

That aspect of the human condition, that aspect of **us** is captured well, in the words of the Litany of Penitence which we read together last Sunday. It is part of the prayer our wonderful Prayer Book offers to launch us into the experience and adventure of Lent. I’ll not go through all of it, but some of those phrases fit this morning’s reflection:

“We confess to you, Lord, the pride, hypocrisy and impatience of our lives . . .

our exploitation of other people . . .

our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty .

..

our prejudice and contempt for those who differ from us. . . .”

It is for these things, and no doubt many others, that Jesus brings front and center the topic of transformation in his conversation with Nicodemus. “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being reborn.” That is, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being deeply transformed. For most of us that is a continuing process.

In this 2008 season of Lent may we – you, me, all of us – find time and ways to follow Jesus’ call to go deeper into spiritual transformation. That, I would suggest is the path for finding our way from blindness and dead spots in our lives to the new and abundant life Jesus promises. It is the path of taking stock so that we can move out of darkness into the extraordinary light which we know is coming in the Easter celebration. It is, I would suggest, is no casual exercise. Our life as authentic, grace-filled, liberated, alive persons depends on it – so that we can live our hours and days and years as best we can to reflect God’s love and God’s light in this world at this time.