

The Church of the Holy Cross
Second Sunday in Lent
March 20, 2011
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The Promise of Newness

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?”
(Nicodemus the Pharisee to Jesus: John chapter 3, verse 4)

The season of Lent is a time when preachers love to say catchy phrases like “Confession is good for the soul” and “Repentance: it does a body good”. Show up to church and get told that giving things up will help you understand the holy. Embrace strange concepts like self-denial, which most of us translate “to feel bad for awhile”--and somehow you are supposed to feel better.

Now I am a classic preacher type: I love this stuff--and what’s more, I believe it’s true. Regular confession makes you aware that God delights in showing mercy; repentance helps you understand that with God it’s never too late; giving things up makes you mindful that God is wildly generous; self-denial exposes your longing for God and God’s longing for you.

Isn’t that wonderful! Give up all the things that make life feel good so you encounter the source of all Good. Oh yes, preachers love to talk about this stuff. But believe me, we don’t love to do it any more than anyone else.

What happens for most of us who try to practice things like self-denial is that we get stuck on ourselves before we get to God. We slip up on our discipline and then get discouraged; we fall back on bad habits and then get disappointed in ourselves; we try to get rid of that damned thing we always do but it comes out again and we start to despair. We get stuck on ourselves before we get to God.

But today’s Gospel reading from John reverses the usual order and puts first things first: “For *God* so loved the world that he gave his only Son...*God* sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”

God loved the world, loved so much that he gave. Not to condemn but to save. Not to condemn.

In the midst of our frustration with ourselves and our anger at our limitations, John reminds us of why we’re here. We are on the way of the cross not because of what we have done or left undone but because of what God has done. It was out of love that he came among us and stood beside us and chided us and died for us. Love.

Maybe this Lent what you can give up is that certainty that God is out to get you (and not in a good way). Maybe you give up that lingering worry that God is punishing you for that mistake you made years ago. Maybe this Lent you give up that notion that the other shoe is about to drop because you just caught a break. For God so loved that he gave...not to condemn but to save.

There is good reason to stop here but for our friend Nicodemus who goes to see Jesus in the darkness of night. Years ago as a sophomore in college I decided to attend a Bible study

run by a Christian group on campus. Not having done this before, I unearthed my old Confirmation Bible and tucked it under my arm. It is one of those older Bibles that says "Holy Bible" in gold script on the front. As I walked through the glass doors of my dormitory I saw some friends coming down the walk toward me. These were fellow English literature students and philosophy students, or athletes, or likely both. Without thinking I quickly turned the outside cover side of the Bible toward me so they wouldn't see the title; it might as well have been Shakespeare or Milton, thank goodness. But I have thought of that impulse frequently since then: why did I do this? Most of us go to Jesus by night. Nicodemus gets kicked around in the tradition, but I am glad he goes to Jesus by night.

But it's Nicodemus' response to Jesus that gets me: Jesus says that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above--or born anew as the translation allows. And Nicodemus says, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

Now if we can put aside for a few moments any baggage from the language of "born again" this will be helpful. Some of us carry a bad taste in our mouths for good reason: a standard has been set in some Christian circles that require one kind of "born again" experience. Jesus in fact resists giving an equation to Nicodemus--he has the chance to get specific but he keeps the language ambiguous: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it but do not know where it comes from or where it goes--so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The gift of new life from God retains a certain mystery.

So back to Nicodemus' question, "How can anyone be born anew after having grown old?": You may know of gyms that measure your body age--I went recently and learned that my body is several years older than my actual age--I have grown old beyond my years.

Most of us grow old before our time: children and youth today grow up so fast because among other things of access to a previously unimagined amount of information...our culture's loss of restraint in the name of realism--makes children acutely aware of more worldly things than ever before...my three year old daughter was listening to the radio and she said, "O that's the singer, Rihanna."--how did she know this? Whether in film or in news, we are exposed to more tragedy, more violence, more death than ever before in human history... ..we work too hard, eat, drink, and smoke too much, sleep too little...Our world seems to be spiraling into the chaos of old age: disasters in Japan and violent uprisings in the Middle East...the pressures of culture assume a cynicism about life...all such that no matter our age most of us have grown old--in heart, body, or mind...So Nicodemus is not asking a bad question here: "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Can anything new come?

The strange truth of God throughout all of Scripture is that God is always about doing new things, creating new life to be born:

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says: I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?...

Again from Isaiah: For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth...

The Psalmist proclaims: Sing to the Lord a new song!

And the Apostle Paul: So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

The poet Wendell Berry, writing as an old man at the end of his life, wrote: "The question before me, now that I am old, is not how to be dead, which I know from enough practice, but how to be alive." This is the realization of Nicodemus: most of us know how to be dead from enough practice, and we need to learn how to be born anew.

For me, I feel like I have been born anew so many times I can't count them all. Each day is a rebirth, a fresh start, a new beginning that I did not earn or deserve. Anyone who has ever received anesthesia for surgery knows that you do not control or have the power to wake yourself up afterwards--that is sheer gift, a rebirth. In every morning prayer in the Anglican tradition is "create, create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me: the word for "create" is the same used in Genesis--it's the sense that something brand new is being given. Every time I receive Communion, new birth, a fresh start; every time my wife forgives me for being a curmudgeonly brute, new life. After having grown old, we can be born anew.

To trust that new life is possible beyond what we are able to make happen ourselves means we can look to the future in hope, not dread; means we can leave the old without paralyzing fear, it allows us to move forward, to resist nostalgia. We all feel nostalgia for the past, but God is the worker of the future. It means a fresh start is possible. We are not defined by our past but by the future God is bringing forth. What Jesus is trying to tell Nicodemus, trying to tell us, is that with God new life is not only possible; it is promise.