

John 3:1-17  
February 17, 2008

South Plains  
2<sup>nd</sup> Lent

### Transitions

In the spring of 2001 Logan and Heather Ward began an experiment. They moved with their two year old son Luther from the heart of New York City to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. They bought a small farm, cut off the electricity, installed wood-burning stoves and resolved to live for one whole year as if they were living in the year 1900. It was a wrenching transition from the twenty-first century back to the beginning of the twentieth.

In some ways, their move was like the migration of Abram from Haran to Canaan, a move that Genesis explains with a word from the Lord: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you (12:1)." Most of us find the transition from our father's house pretty normal. When a young person grows up, they leave home. For an ancient Middle Easterner, however, leaving country and kindred meant abandoning security for a new way of life.

Any major transition in life brings stress. Starting middle school or getting a promotion at work can mean a seismic shift in the way we perceive ourselves. A new middle schooler goes from lording it over kindergarten kids to squatting at the bottom of the junior high totem pole. A new boss may find that old friends no longer joke

and tease with the same freedom they once enjoyed. Changing his address meant that Abram was changing not only the place he worshiped, but also the way he understood God and especially his place in God's universe.

That's the magnitude of the change Nicodemus faces the night he visits Jesus. John's gospel says he came by night not only because he was a little reluctant to be seen associating with this Galilean rabbi, but also because he was figuratively in the dark about Jesus. Like many of us, Nicodemus comes to Jesus with questions. He's curious and brings a fund of general information about the kind of things Jesus talks about. They are both educated Jews, conversant with scripture and with the God of scripture. Nicodemus thinks he is on familiar ground, but he is cautious about the way this ground is shifting.

He's been impressed by signs that indicate to him that Jesus comes from God (Whenever you read the word "signs" in this gospel, it means more than a miracle, it means an event that points to something beyond the wonder itself). But, when he compliments Jesus for his miracles, Jesus does not seem to hear the compliment. Jesus replies, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (3:3)."

Perhaps Jesus intends to encourage Nicodemus to come closer to the kingdom. If that's the case, Nicodemus misses the point. As Jesus often does in this

gospel, his words have a double meaning. The little Greek phrase in our reading can mean “born again” as though Jesus is suggesting that we need to start life over as a baby coming out of the womb. And, that’s what Nicodemus hears. But, it can also mean “born anew” as in a fresh start, or “born from above” as in starting a life from God.

Poor Nicodemus is a literalist. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” he wants to know. Nicodemus is an educated man. He should have known better than to flatten Jesus’ words into a clever sound bite. When Jimmy Carter announced to the press that he was a “born again Christian,” the media reacted much like Nicodemus. “What in the world does that mean?” Some journalists have made progress since 1976, but not all. Today when a candidate says he or she is a born again Christian, those words get flattened again to mean a theological and social conservative.

Jesus is not recommending a political party to Nicodemus or to us. He patiently explains that being “born from above” means “being born of water and Spirit.” It’s helpful for us to remember something that John’s gospel has said earlier about children of God. Children of God, according to John 1:13 are “born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”

In the effort to make this language understandable to popular culture, “born again” has become worldly,

almost fashionable. It’s lost its moorings in the radical grace of Jesus Christ. No one chooses to be born of the Spirit. The Spirit is like the wind that blows where it chooses. Last Sunday we heard the wind whistle around this roof, but we couldn’t control the wind. Being “born from above,” “anew,” or “again” means we have experienced the Spirit of God in all its fury, allowing it to reshape our lives, turn us around and refresh us so radically that we start living all over again.

Nicodemus is probably getting a little frustrated and befuddled with this conversation. He knows that in his language, “wind” and “spirit” are the same word. So, is Jesus using puns to confuse him? What does all this double-talk have to do with the signs and miracles he’s seen? Like a dog with a bone, Nicodemus goes back to the beginning of his conversation with this preacher, the business of being born again. “How can these things be?” he wonders aloud.

“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” says Jesus. I have to believe Jesus is being a little sarcastic. Of course Nicodemus does not understand these things. He thinks Jesus is just another rabbi, another teacher with some new insights for reading scripture, but nothing more. He sees the signs and miracles of Jesus as credentials of Jesus’ authority to teach. He cannot imagine that everything Jesus says and everything Jesus does is opening the kingdom itself. Jesus is the doorway into the kingdom. But, that idea is beyond poor Nicodemus.

So Jesus tries yet again to explain what's happening in terms that an educated Jew might understand. There's an incident recorded in the book of Numbers about the troubles of the children of Israel as they traveled from Egypt through the wilderness. The Israelites complained one time too many. According to the story, the Lord got fed up with the griping and sent poisonous serpents among the people. People began dying of snakebite. They prayed for help; and this is what God told Moses to do. Moses made a bronze serpent, attached it to a pole, and raised it up where everyone could see it. When someone was bitten by a poisonous serpent, if they looked at the bronze serpent that God had provided they would not die. Anthropologists tell us this was a primitive healing ritual to acknowledge God's power and provision.

Jesus recalls this story to say that just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness to bring life to the people, so the Son of Man would be lifted up. Anyone who believed in him would have life. And, this life would be of such a different quality that he called it "eternal life." It would be like being born again because it would be life from above, life from God.

This is way beyond what Nicodemus can comprehend at this point in his acquaintance with Jesus. Jesus is claiming that he himself is the key to new life, a life immeasurably different from what was accepted as normal by Israel then or by our culture today.

This new life in Christ is characterized by love. I don't know anyone who doesn't want to be loved. What's different and difficult is that we are the ones called upon to practice love. Fortunately, Jesus shows us how.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments (14:15)."

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (15:12)."

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (15:13)."

If we can stand the stories coming out of Iraq, we will hear about soldiers who give up their lives to save their buddies. The same sacrifice is occasionally demanded during natural disasters and violent crimes. The more common sacrifices are the ones that seldom make the news: The parent who sacrifices career and leisure to care for a special needs child. The young person who gives up the popular lifestyle of carefree fun in order to befriend an unpopular classmate. The ordinary volunteer giving his or her time to run errands for a neighbor, or to build a handicapped ramp for a trailer in SW Virginia on a mission trip.

One need not be a professing Christian to practice those deeds of love. But, we believe that Jesus Christ is the doorway to this kind of life. He provides the example. He inspires the motivation. He makes possible the sacrifices when we don't want to go quite so far as to

give up our valuable time, our pleasures, our neat, little self-centered lives.

Occasionally, I fantasize about cooking on a woodstove and using a horse drawn plow for my garden just as my ancestors did a hundred years ago. I'd rather dream about those changes than make them. All of us, however, will experience transitions less exotic but just as demanding. We will experience losses and gains that require us to begin again, to start to live a new life.

To be born again, to be born from above, to be born of the Spirit of God creates a new life that can put every other beginning in perspective. Believing in the Son of God and entering his kingdom will not remove the pain of loss or ease the trauma of newness. It will show us that we can endure transitions, whether they are wrenching, unwanted changes or changes that we welcome despite the stress. Believing in Jesus Christ gives us someone's hand to hold, someone who will not let go of us. And, the longer we live that new life, the more time we spend in that kingdom, the better God can equip us for anything our old life can throw at us.

When spring came to the Shenandoah Valley in 2002, Logan and Heather realized how much they had grown in the course of their year. As they began making preparations to return to the twenty-first century, a strange feeling of reverse culture shock came over them. They were more anxious about returning to modern conveniences than they had been about abandoning

them. Despite the hardships, the result of giving up their old luxuries had been worth it. They would taste vegetables with new gusto after growing their own garden. They would gather around the table with friends and family with new appreciation for that love. They would value the skill of mechanics after spending hours to repair a harness.

When we are becoming Christians, (and we will be always "becoming" until we get to heaven), when we are becoming more Christian as we believe more in Jesus Christ, we see the old life with new eyes. We do the same old things often in the same old relationships but with new perspective. Our world is new. Our whole world is becoming part of the new heaven and new earth in God's kingdom.

So remember, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Pray for that new birth every day.