



Hear the Word

from Pastor Mary-Alyce Burleigh

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Second Sunday in Lent

March 12, 2017

Seeking New Birth

John 3:1-17

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our creator and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Today and next Sunday our text features two main characters: "Nicodemus" and "the Woman at the Well." Each was transformed by their encounter with Jesus. Each explores two key themes in the Gospel of John - Light and darkness - night. Night in scripture is a metaphor - when things are unclear and/or beyond explanation. Water is also an important symbol as our baptism in water and spirit is an act of God that transforms our lives.

Speaking of water, it has been said that the Gospel of John is "shallow enough for a child to wade in and deep enough to drown an elephant." It is why many preachers love John - there are so many layers to explore. In that spirit, today I am going to take on the role of Nicodemus and speak to you as if he were here with us today.

Good morning everyone. I would like to introduce myself. My name is Nicodemus and I am mentioned in your Bible. You may not, however know much else about me. For example I was born in a wealthy neighborhood in Jerusalem. We lived on a hill directly across from the Temple compound. We even had our own bridge built so we would not have to walk through the poor areas of town to go to temple. It was a good life. I remember our house being huge. There were mosaics on the floor, fountains, gardens and many servants.

My education was mainly through tutors hired by my parents and I progressed to the level you might describe as a PhD. All my connections and training set me up to make a significant amount of money. I worked closely with the Romans and I was paid handsomely. I was able to buy my own mansion, with my own servants. When I married into another wealthy family we were easily in the upper 1/10 of 1 percent of the population. Once I had enough money, I was chosen to serve in the Sanhedrin. Your Bible says I was a "leader of the Jews." Well it was much more than what you might think. I was one of 70 people who ran the country and the Temple. Our Sanhedrin was like your Supreme Court, your Senate and your top religious institution rolled into one. Few if any can match my accomplishments. I seemed to have arrived at the top of the wealth and power pyramid.

But now that I had accomplished all this, I must say to you I was not that happy and am feeling that what I did and have is not as important and fulfilling as I had thought they would be. There is something missing. I am not really at peace. When I heard from one of my servants about

a preacher called Jesus, I was intrigued. Evidently many common people are listening to him. Jesus seemed to be spreading joy and peace and goodness wherever he went. He healed people. He loved the poor and I noticed that my servants who met him seemed more at peace, happier even than I. And I must admit I constantly compared myself to people I thought were either above me on the pyramid or below me. Jesus set me free to live in a circle where there is no need to compare oneself with others.

I was still a member of the Sanhedrin but now, instead of seeing it as a position of power - I saw it as a position of service and responsibility. I was still wealthy but now, instead of using my wealth for my own indulgence, I used it to change the world.

Seeing life more as a circle than a pyramid has given me the joy and peace and purpose I was missing.

I have not been alive for more than 2000 years but I suspect that some of you here today might feel something is also missing in your life.

~ Maybe you are living your own kind of pyramid quest.

~ Maybe you compare yourself to others either 'above' or 'below' you.

~ Maybe your own search for happiness, peace and purpose has left you empty, or lonely or fearful.

I tell you today that you too can push the 'reset' button.

You too can be "born from above".

One thing Jesus said to me I will never forget.

I immediately memorized the words as soon as I heard them.

You call it John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

I have heard that many of you have also memorized these words of Jesus but I am concerned that your English language has not captured all of what Jesus meant when he first spoke those words to me. I am concerned especially about the word "believe." "Whoever believes in him shall not perish."

Some of you seem to think that to 'believe' is to do something with your minds only - that is something intellectual - to think something is true.

The word "believe' in my language is more about trust and following. When Jesus spoke to me I realized Jesus was inviting me to something more than thinking. He was inviting me to TRUST the path he would show me. He was inviting me to follow him. He was inviting me to step into the circle.

Into the light.

Jesus did not want me to "perish" and I was indeed perishing.

I was going through the motions of life but inside I was definitely perishing. Instead, Jesus offered me "eternal life." And let me tell you "eternal life" is much more than going to heaven after you die.

"Eternal life" is better understood as life in the spirit of God.

It is life in its fullness.

It is life that is holy, joyful and meaningful.

It is a life of Shalom - Peace.

I watched my own servants come alive after meeting Jesus. I could see “eternal life” in them. Their souls seemed to shine. NOW I sense that same light and life. I feel more at peace than at any other moment of my life.

~ I pray the same gift of “Eternal life’ also for you.

~ I pray that you might trust Jesus to lead you into the peace you seek.

~ I pray for you a circle of life rather than a pyramid.

~ I pray for you a life in the light.

Amen.

Let us Pray....

In this season of Lent, O God, unsettle us. Increase in us that sense of gnawing that arises from the incongruity between our lives and life to which you call us, and work in us the newness of nurture and vocation, demand, and promise and healing and peace. To come out of the darkness and into the light. Amen.