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A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF JESUS: TRAPPED BY TRIUMPHS

John 3:1-9

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Poor old Nicodemus. How thickheaded he must have been! How could he possibly not have understood salvation means being born again! It's so obvious! Or at least that's what we think.

But in fact, the modern use of this passage is actually much more misguided than Nicodemus' fumbling faith. People have turned Jesus' metaphor, meant to help Nicodemus' stumbling faith, into a cookie cutter path to salvation.

You know how this works. People ask, "Have you been saved?" They ask, "Have you been born again?"

As a chaplain at Trenton State Prison another chaplain asked me, "Are you saved? Have you been born again?"

I was not feeling patient so I responded, "Saved from what?" Then, knowing this would worry him even more, I proceeded to tell him I was a Presbyterian minister. He looked carefully at me, considered me for a minute, and, while shaking his head said, "I don't think you're saved!" He was certain that I was destined for hell.

I admit to being frustrated by such folks because they fail to realize that Nicodemus' confusion is shared by all of us. Jesus was not trying to make it simple to understand. The point of this passage is to realize that we are all Nicodemus. And, to presume that we know how to climb back into our mother's womb, so to speak, is to completely miss the point of this passage. Salvation is not, and can never be, a 1-2-3 step process – the same way you might balance your checkbook. That is actually the point behind Jesus rather bizarre metaphor.

Jesus is trying to show us that you can't understand it in a simple fashion, the same way you could never really climb back into your mother's womb. It's the equivalent of something as strange,

surreal, and bizarre as doing precisely that. Jesus' call to be born again is meant to shock us; it is meant to wake us up and to make us think.

So, I suggest this morning we think of this less as a plan of salvation, or a path to heaven, and more about the question that has plagued humans throughout the ages – for which every modern American hungers, including you and me – *What is the meaning of life?* That's what this passage is about. Not about getting to heaven; not at all.

Nicodemus, far from being an inept clergyman, is very much like many of us. He sensed a void in his life. He had been living a surface existence. His faith of hand washing and ritual sacrifice left him hungry for more. Maybe you have felt it. Maybe your daily life, your church life, and your relationships sometimes leaves you feeling strangely empty within.

And we will do almost anything to fill that void. We may try to fill it with pleasure, endless parties, games, or sexual escapades – they will all fail us. Most of the infidelities I have counseled have been less about a lack of love for their spouse and more about a feeling of emptiness inside.

People mistake the tantalizing excitement of a fling for something more than it is. In speaking to these couples and these individuals, the sense of isolation and being lost in the world is palpable. It is the same thing that often drives a person deep into the bottle.

Soren Kierkegaard tried life guided by pleasure, only to experience its radical failure which he described in *Sickness Unto Death* using these words:

In the bottomless ocean of pleasure I have sounded in vain for a spot to cast an anchor. I have felt the almost irresistible power with which one pleasure drags another after it,

the kind of adulterated enthusiasm which it is capable of producing the boredom, the torment that follow.

Novelist Milan Kendra writes that what the middle class thought “would be a better life, gained through hard work and material accumulation, is proving not only to be more difficult to attain than they had imagined, but also less satisfying when it is attained.” (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, [New York: Penguin, 1981], 37)

It is less satisfying because all the endless hours of fulltime work for both parents, coupled with driving your children everywhere, winds up leaving no time, no energy for just being, just sitting, just sipping iced tea with no agenda, but to be present to life.

Ultimately, the life we have carved out for ourselves cannot satisfy. That is what Nicodemus discovered and drove him to Jesus. Even ritual observance of the law cannot answer our purpose in life.

Novelist John Updike said, “The fact that... we still live well cannot ease the pain of feeling that we no longer live nobly.” What a powerful thought. Are you living a noble life? Am I?

Everyone on these quests is looking for something. Some call it happiness, others peace, Christians call it salvation and we believe it can only be found in Jesus.

Now part of Nicodemus sensed this. He saw something in Jesus that he wanted. He heard stories about a man who could do things and be things beyond normal men. He was drawn to him, to see if he might glean a nugget of truth that might lead to life. And Jesus gives it. That famous / infamous phrase, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” It is not about getting to heaven!

Then Nicodemus asks the question for which he is accused of being obtuse, “How can one be born again after having grown old? Can one enter a second time his mother’s womb and be born?” But this is a great question.

How, after one has grown old, can he learn something new ... truly learn something new? Not how can he learn to do this or be a little better of a person, be a little more patient, a little more kind, a little more forgiving. No, that is not what he is asking. It is not what Jesus is talking about.

But how can he do something so radically different that it deserves to be called a new birth? How can he – and we – break the tyranny of our own past behaviors and successes?

You, see Nicodemus not only came to Jesus hungry, but afraid as well. He came at night so his Pharisee friends wouldn’t see him asking a carpenter religious questions. As a Pharisee he had earned the respect from the people and it was this very respect, his very success as a Pharisee, which kept him from letting go. He was trapped by his triumphs.

We also want to know how we can break the past. We have tried, by the millions, to be born into new behaviors. But with each year we grow more set into our patterns, more unable to break free from who we have become. We have tried the starting over method with diets, marriages, and new attitudes, but eventually we fall back into our old patterns.

Jesus then tells Nicodemus how one can be born again/above, “What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

The flesh refers to all things earthly and all earthly things come to an end. Flesh grows old, wrinkles, and dies. No matter how many billions of dollars science spends, this is inevitable. No matter how many billions someone earns, it can be taken away. No matter how many rules one follows, eventually they will fall. As long as any solution we concoct begins with things of this earth, it will be doomed to failure.

Jesus challenges us to live our life with a whole new understanding, a whole new goal and reason for being. He gives us the new meaning of life. It is not to find pleasure. It is not to be successful. It is not to follow the law or be moral. Those are all

things born of this world. Not bad, but not worthy of a life's goal. Shedding a few pounds will not do it. Saving more cannot achieve it. Doing more good deeds will not cut it. Instead, he tells us we must be born from above.

Here, in the South, people always want to know where you're from and who your parents are. If they know your people, then they know you. This is because the place out of which we are born, in large part, defines who we are. That is why Jesus challenges us to be born not from this world, not to play from its rules. What we need is all of who we are to be born out of God, not pleasure, wealth, or duty, but for and of God.

This terrifies and confuses Nicodemus, "How can this be?!" He sees how much it requires. It is too hard, too fearful to learn to live life from a whole new perspective. It will take courage to do what Jesus asks – profound courage. How can we be born again so that we can see the Kingdom of God?

By now you are wondering... What is the Kingdom of God, if not heaven? What is Jesus talking about? What is it to see the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God is of this world. It is being able to see God's reign in this life; being able to see things from God's perspective.

You have heard me talk about my father. One of the most striking moments when he lived with us for six months, in the midst of his Alzheimer's, he reminded me what it is to look at the sun and say, "Isn't that glorious! Isn't that wonderful!" It reminded me to see it from God's perspective.

And I also wanted to share with you that seeing the Kingdom of God is seeing the world through God's lens, for his purposes. One moment that might be seeing life in all its glory, in all its wonder, in the way that God made it.

In another way, it might be something terribly difficult. (*showing picture*) This was my daughter Liz's Faith Statement in Confirmation. It is a picture of Jesus as a homeless person. When she did this, I

thought to myself, "What a wonderful thing!" And I sort of stopped thinking about it after that.

Recently, Spartanburg has been dealing with what some might term a "homeless problem", because there are more homeless people here. I was in a conversation with some folks from the city the other day and found out that other towns are dropping their homeless people off in Spartanburg because the word is getting out that Spartanburg is a good place to go. Without thinking I said, "Isn't that wonderful!" – because people see Spartanburg as a caring place, as a place that is willing to look out for others. Of course, that was not what they were thinking at all.

And then I thought back to my daughter's Statement of Faith, where Jesus is depicted as a homeless person. And we all know that verse, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25:35-36) Jesus is saying, "When you cared for them, you cared for me."

But have we really seen it the way Jesus intended. Have we really seen them [homeless people] literally and directly as Jesus *himself*!

The Kingdom of God – that is being able to see Jesus everywhere! No matter where you are in life, see it with his compassion, with his devotion, with his joy, and with his caring. To be born again is not about life ever after, it is about life here and now!

So, can I tell you how to climb back in your mother's womb and be born again? No, I can't. But I can tell you to seek it out with everything you've got. Amen.