

## The Power of the Second Chance

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“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again’.” – John 3:3 (NIV)

One of the great joys of preaching is the chance to try again. You may have seen a minister pray silently before entering the pulpit. Do you know what the preacher was likely saying to God? Probably something along these lines: “Please, God, don’t let this be my last sermon.”

We all need a second chance, no one more so than a preacher. Every sermon we preach is, on the one hand, the same message delivered in a different way – the gospel, in other words – and, on the other hand, every sermon distorts in some greater or lesser degree that great good news because no sermon captures the fullness of God’s love for the world completely, purely, or accurately. It’s impossible. It can’t be done, and any preacher who says that they’ve done it is trying to sell you something you don’t want to buy.

I was asked some years ago to facilitate a preaching seminar for my colleagues in the Living Water Association. We call those seminars Communities of Practice, and mine is called the Excellence in Preaching Community of Practice. And that’s what we strive for – excellence in our preaching. My colleagues Adam and Brent and Melody and Steve and Allen and Jeff come from every corner of the association once a month to gather at our church in Hudson to talk about preaching, listen to preaching, and try to preach better. It’s a marvelous graduate seminar in preaching that none of us was blessed to have in our schooling. There’s no substitute for learning from a fellow practitioner. They know what they’re doing, and, more importantly, they know what you’re doing when you’re trying to do it, and if they’re very, very good, they can tell you in a way that will not be ego-bashing what you’re doing right and how you can do that better.

I also exchange my sermons, every week, with my friend and colleague Jeff Gerber, an excellent preacher in our church in New Philadelphia. Jeff is unfailingly gracious, thoughtful, and insightful in his comments on my sermons, and you out there in Pewville have him and his colleague, Jill Lovett, as much as any of my preaching professors to thank that you’re not getting worse from me on Sunday mornings. Jeff helps give me a second chance.

We all need a second chance, and that’s the message – the gospel, the good news – Jesus delivered to poor bewildered, befuddled, and far-from-courageous Nicodemus in that lovely reading from John’s gospel.

You, Nicodemus, leader of the Jewish people, expert in the law, and open-minded believer – you need and you get a second chance. You get a second chance to get it right – “it” being the message of salvation entrusted to your ancestor in the flesh and in the Spirit, Abraham:

12:2 "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 12:3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

I have heard ignorant people hear these words and speak of Jewish tribalism or sectarianism or aloofness or a sense of privilege; and no doubt, there are Jewish people who partake of those unfortunate character traits in varying degrees. Every group of people is vulnerable to those ways of thinking and behaving.

But it is hard to find a more universal message of salvation – you might have to look at John 3:16 to find it – than the message God gave to Abraham. Leave your ancestral home – leave everything near and dear and familiar to you – and take up your life and follow me for the sake of the world, the whole world, no exceptions – "all the families of the earth." No exceptions. Not in Syria. Not at the wall along our southern border. Not in Mexico. All means all, and family is not defined.

Do you hear the echo – actually, the original of which Jesus's words would become the echo – in "If anyone wishes to be my disciple, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me"? Can you see the golden thread of continuity – of good news, of the gospel – running from Genesis to the Gospel of Matthew? Was it any less of a cross for Abraham to follow God than it is for us to follow Jesus? Was Abraham's sacrifice inferior to any that we are asked to make? Was his faith any less noble, any less robust, any less exemplary than the faith God will find in any of us Christians?

The "Father Abraham" we've known since Sunday School was from a place the Bible calls "Ur of the Chaldeans," a Sumerian city whose ruins lay in modern-day Iraq not far from the Persian Gulf. There was a temple in Ur dedicated to the moon god, Sin, and it's very likely that Abraham's ancestors and probably Abraham himself were worshipers of that Sumerian god, among other gods. Abraham was almost certainly not born a monotheist.

But Abraham was called to a second chance, a chance to start again in a new place, with a new god and a new, monotheistic faith. And the purpose of that re-start was not so that Abraham would feel good about himself – the Bible is no program of self-improvement – but rather so that Abraham could be a blessing to the world and help the world become a blessing to itself.

That's what the Bible understands second chances to be: the chance to help restore that paradise that we lost – and lose and lose again – through our willful disobedience. The Bible is a book of second chances, because none of us is born getting it right, and none of us always gets it right. Every morning, if we accept it, is a re-birth into another chance to get it right.

"New every morning is the love our wakening and uprising prove" is the way the Anglican priest John Keble put it in his famous hymn. You and I are the proof of God's love that is fresh and new every single day. Every time we open our eyes we have been given the opportunity of the second chance – one of the greatest signs of God's love and faithfulness.

And in our gospel reading Nicodemus is tentatively, furtively, under cover of darkness reaching out for that second chance. He's heard about Jesus – as a leader of the Jewish people it was his job to hear about new developments and disturbances in Jewish religious life – and he may even have been among the crowds listening to Jesus's teachings and witnessing Jesus's powers of healing.

“Rabbi,” he begins, using the title of highest respect for a Jewish teacher, “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Good opening, Nicodemus, and Nicodemus is probably voicing a widespread opinion about Jesus. “The common people heard him gladly,” Mark reports (12:37), and Jesus did have many followers, not just the twelve we hear so much about. So far, so good in this nighttime tutorial.

But then Jesus responds completely out of left field, leaving Nicodemus with a wrinkled brow: “3:3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Jesus’s response is a complete non-sequitur to Nicodemus. What does being born from above or again – the Greek can mean both – have to do with Nicodemus’s recognition of Jesus as an authentic religious teacher?

So he says, “What?” by saying this: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

It’s an example of Jesus and someone talking past each other, which happens repeatedly in John’s gospel. Just a few verses earlier Jesus and his mother have exchanged confused words about the wine shortage at a wedding in Cana, and later Jesus and a Samaritan woman will have an almost comically fractured theological discussion when they meet at Jacob’s Well. From the very beginning of John’s gospel, the evangelist emphasizes that Jesus’s true identity is a baffling mystery to most people, especially those who would have been most likely to recognize him.

From John’s Prologue: “1:10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 1:11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”

You and I Christian hear these words and we think of the Jewish people, but that’s a convenient and pernicious dodge. It’s convenient because it paints us as the good guys and the Jews as the bad guys, and we know what horrors that dichotomy has led to. It’s pernicious because John is talking about all people’s rejection of the Word of God made flesh – Jew and Gentile alike. And that eternal, uncreated Word of God does not belong to any of us in any sectarian sense, and so none of us can be blamed in any particular way for its mistreatment and rejection.

Rather, the Word belongs to all of us and is spoken to all of us. The Word of God speaks to all of us, everywhere, all the time, including through the pages of the Bible. That’s what makes the Bible the Bible – it’s the written expression of the spiritual Word of God. The Bible is not an end in itself; the Bible points us to a spiritual reality deeper than any words on a printed page. That’s the first point I have to make to the students who take my Introduction to Biblical Studies course, and I hope to see a lot of you enrolled the next time I teach it.

The Bible is sacred scripture because it has sacred power, that is, the spiritual power to change lives. The Bible is revelatory of a transcendent reality that we call God, and because it reveals something of God to us, it itself partakes of what it reveals, just as a window shows us what’s inside a department store. The Bible’s power to change lives is what makes the Bible inspired – “God-breathed” to use the word in 2 Timothy. And it’s one of the naivetes of the Protestant Reformation that we oxygen-breathing human beings can master a God-breathed document.

Of course we can learn more about its planking and details – the historical context in which it was written, how the words were used in various places and over time in the languages in which its written, and so forth, and all of that matters – but it's arrogant to think that we can master the Bible's power the way, say, we master the power of a horse with bit and bridle.

And that untamable spiritual power is what Jesus is referring to, I think, when he says to Nicodemus, "3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 3:8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

None of us knows how God's Spirit will provide someone with a second chance, but I can promise you that it will, if you let it. And you do have to let it. You do have to cooperate with the Holy Spirit if you wish to begin living that new life in this life that makes the next life real. Nicodemus, whose name means "The People's Victory," testifies to that truth. Nicodemus, we learn as his story unfolds, was part of the people's victory of overcoming their own imprisonment in the way their lives had always been.

Nicodemus got his second chance and he took it, despite its baffling beginning in his nighttime tutorial with Jesus. When we next hear of Nicodemus, he is defending Jesus against the Pharisees – his own religious cohort – who want to arrest Jesus without giving him a fair hearing. And the last time we hear of Nicodemus is when he and another of Jesus's secret disciples, Joseph of Arimathea, prepare Jesus's body for burial after his crucifixion.

Do those actions make Nicodemus a Christian? Not in a sectarian sense, no. Does doing for Jesus what his own disciples were too afraid to do make him a believer? I think so.

I think Nicodemus got his second chance in that first encounter with Jesus and he took it. He took those baffling words about being born again or born from above seriously, pondered them in his heart, paid attention to both his Jewish religious roots and the new plantings Jesus was grafting on to that ancient tree and in Nicodemus's heart and mind; and when the opportunity arose, Nicodemus acted. He showed that love that Jesus spoke of in those famous and much abused words, "For God so loved the world. . . ." The whole world, no exceptions, not even criminals crucified as religious blasphemers, disturbers of the peace, and political subversives.

Among our Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic siblings, Nicodemus is regarded as a saint. He was, in his own way, a believer. What form did his belief take? He took the offer of a second chance from God's Word Made Flesh – and acted upon it. Maybe that's what you need to do. Maybe you need to make Nicodemus your patron saint.