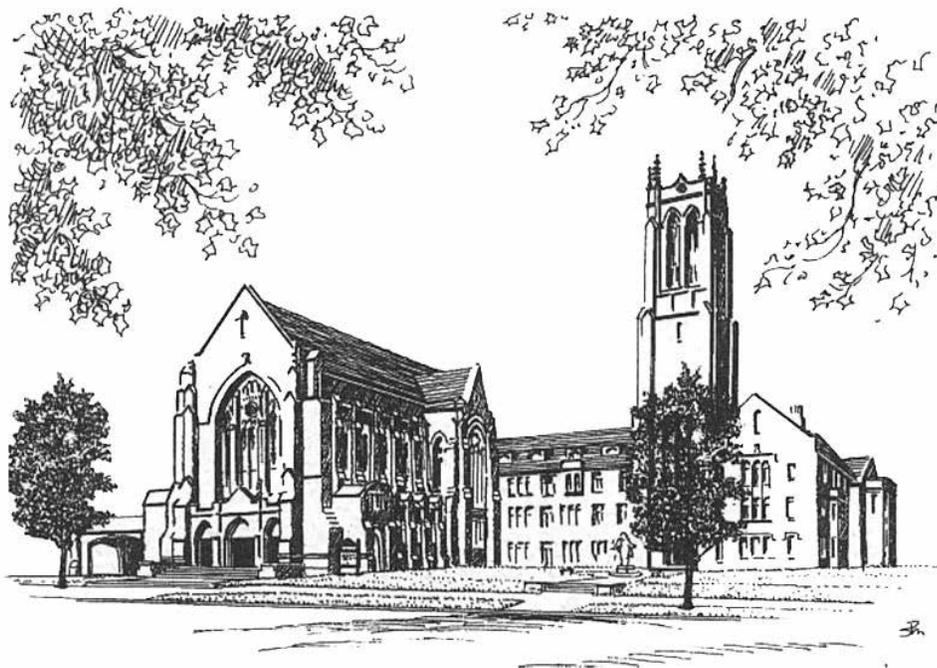


UNTITLED
by
Rev. Emily Chapman
March 16, 2014
Second Sunday of Lent
8:30, 9:45, and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; and John 3:1-17

One of my favorite things to read each week is the *Onion*. It's a satirical online news source, if you can call it news, so everything is pretty much made up. Recent headlines have been things like "Cow lowered onto floor of US House of Representatives" and "Obama Admits US hasn't Been the Same Since Buddy Holly Died."

They had an article at the end of January that was the best kind of satire — funny, because it gets at something that is deeply true. The headline read, "Report: Today the day they find out you're a fraud." Just a little sampling: "While experts agree you've been remarkably successful so far at keeping up the ruse that you're a capable, worthwhile individual, a new report out this week indicates that today is the day they finally figure out you're a complete and utter fraud."

The "report," compiled by the Pew Research Center, states that some-time within the next 24 hours, people will find out that you have no idea what you're doing, that you've been faking it for years, and that, through continuous lying and shameless posturing, you've actually managed to dupe virtually everyone around you into thinking you're something other than a weak and ineffectual person.

It's brilliant because deep down, we all think this, at least from time to time. There have been several articles out in the past few years about something dubbed "imposter syndrome," that we essentially are all terrified of being found out, found not perfect, not good enough. So we try harder and harder. We strive to look like we have got it all together, whatever that means for you — professional success, perfect parenting, living in the right neighborhood, having the right connections. Deep down though, you know the truth. At least you think you do. But the truth is that no one has it all together, and we are all of us longing for something different. We are longing for room to

breathe, authentic community, real grace and love and hope. In short, no matter how good or how shiny our life is, we know there is more to life out there, and we long to get to the heart of who we really are: God's beloved children.

Nicodemus knew this, too. There was nothing wrong by all appearances with his life. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He is an important guy. People respect him. He is well off. He has it all together. He even goes to the Temple and prays and keeps the law like he is supposed to do. But even he is afraid that people will find out he's a fraud — because he knows there is something more to him and the world. He's not quite sure what it is, but he is really drawn to this teacher from Galilee.

This is what leads him to Jesus in the middle of the night. Jesus knows why Nicodemus has come. He says "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Now, "born from above" is what we read this morning. But the Greek word is more commonly translated as "born again." I suspect some of us are more comfortable with the language of "born from above," whether we really get what it means or not, because of the considerable baggage we've let build up around terms like "born again." It's a term that has been used so much we barely know what it means.

Now for Nicodemus, he took the most literal possible interpretation, but I suspect this was not as much out of ignorance as much as it implies resistance to the kind of change Jesus' words demand. Nicodemus is being offered new life. New life is a great gift, but certainly involves a losing of the old one, not just making some gentle improvements. Embracing Jesus doesn't mean becoming a better person, it means becoming a new person altogether. And who wouldn't want to buy a little time on that one? We may worry that we are not as great as we want people to think we are, but we are also not quite ready to throw off the life we know. Nicodemus is a reluctant newborn. He was a Pharisee after all. Between his age and his social status and his immense knowledge, the birth process must have been pretty traumatizing. He did what

most newborns do: squinted against the light and cried with nostalgia for the womb, for the former life, for what used to be.

“Nicodemus, do you want to be born from above” is not an easy question for him. Like a lot of us, his life seems to answer “Yes...no, well, yes... I mean, yes and no.”

Do you want to be born again is not a simple question for a one-time conversion, but a question that is meant to haunt you a little, to linger over your head and work its way into your heart and into your actions. It seems like in the Gospel of John, to be born again is not a flash of light, something you can document a date and time of conversion. It’s a daily journey as we try to move from dutifully standing up at the end of the sermon and saying the creed to letting the beliefs we state open up to our hearts to allow Jesus to come in and live there all the time.

What are we seeking in this season of the church?

It is Lent, a time of dying to the old life that we might have the new. Jesus demands not just a better life, but a new life all together. We celebrate the Lenten season not to improve ourselves, but to die to ourselves that we might rise to new life on Easter morning, born again, again.

Do you want to be born from above?

That is Jesus’ question this morning.

And what are you afraid of?

Nicodemus was afraid of many things. He had a lot to lose if he decided to follow Jesus — his comfort and prestige, perhaps his place at the table in certain groups of people. But maybe his great fear is of losing control. He likes the control he has over life, even over his knowledge of God and of the law. He likes knowing who is righteous and who is a sinner, who is in and who is out. He likes being sure of what he could and could not do.

But when Jesus talks about the Kingdom he says that being born into it is like the wind rushing by. You don’t see the wind, even as it tussles your hair or makes you blink against its force. It’s unpredictable, uncontrollable, un-

containable; it will not be controlled — all things that are a bit frightening to anyone who is pretty comfortable right where they are. When you let the Spirit blow through, you never know what will come wafting in and what will drift out.

What would happen if during this season of Lent we let the Spirit blow through us, through our families, through our church?

To stop striving and trying because we are afraid people will think we are fake, but instead to just hold our hands open to receive what God would put in them. You just might come in next week and find some old prejudices, sorrows or resentments blowing right out the stained-glass windows. We might all come in next week to see some new people sitting on the back rows, near the edge, half hiding behind a pillar or maybe even outside the door just waiting for an invitation in. And you might just find your feet moving toward them. We might find ourselves newly energized to be God's people in our community and the world. We might find ourselves desperately wanting to bear witness to anyone who will listen that the Spirit of God still moves, that being born from above is a journey we are on together.

Maybe this late-night encounter was the start of a whole new life for Nicodemus. We don't always know. We don't hear much more about Nicodemus. He makes two more appearances in John's gospel. Once he makes a half-hearted defense of Jesus to other Pharisees. A second is near the end (We'll read about it in a few weeks.), where he brings 100 pounds of myrrh to help Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body and wrap it in spices and linen cloths. Nicodemus packs Jesus' body with spices, the air around him is thick with regret. Many of us have had the experience at the grave of a family member or beloved friend, wishing for more time, wishing to have gotten it right.

But it doesn't have to be this way for us.

Jesus doesn't get tired of inviting us to be born from above, to have new life, to let the Spirit move through us in new ways. Maybe Nicodemus is a cau-

tionary tale to us here at the beginning of Lent, telling us to lean into instead of run away from those questions that keep us up at night, that we move toward Jesus with open hands to receive the new life that awaits us.

Most Sunday sermons also are available via the church website, www.stpaulshouston.org, as well as pre-printed and on CD. Access the sermons on the website via either the Worship section or the Media Center. The pre-printed sermons are in the information rack at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeier at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.