

# NO LAUGHING MATTER?

Sermon, March 12, 2017

Texts: Genesis 12:1-6; John 3:1-17

Voltaire wrote: *"God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh."* I like that. Some related quotes: Martin Luther -- *"If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there."* A Japanese Proverb -- *"Time spent laughing is time spent with the gods."* Swiss theologian Karl Barth: *"Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God."*

Some of us have a hard time thinking of God as having humor. But take a look at some of the stories in the Bible. If we really look at some of the stories, we can come to no other conclusion than that God has a sense of humor. For example, in the first lectionary text assigned for this second Sunday in Lent we read of God saying to Abram, *"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* That's an incredible, wonderful promise! The only problem is, God made that promise to someone who was childless ... at age seventy-five. And his wife Sarah is sixty-five. Certainly it's a joke of some kind! Couldn't God have made a promise for countless offspring with someone who was, say, nineteen? And it was twenty-five years later, in Chapter 18, that angelic messengers came to Abraham's tent to say, *"That's right. Sarah's going to have a baby."* Sarah was the only one who had an appropriate response to this. She heard what was said and she laughed! There she was, ninety years old, doubled over outside the tent laughing.

Well, Sarah had that baby. And they named him Isaac. Do you know what "Isaac" means in Hebrew? It means "laughter."

Think of laughter as a kind of carbonation. Carbonation takes place when carbon dioxide is injected into water and makes it effervescent, bubbling over, alive and just ready to burst its containers. Well, in a somewhat similar manner, humor injects itself into our regular lives and causes us to effervesce, burst out, bubble over, come alive and laugh; laughter has a wonderful way of elevating our spirits. I may be reaching for an analogy, but on a much larger scale, this is what the Spirit of God does! By grace He comes from above, injects Himself into our souls to bring life and hope and vitality, full and abundant and effervescent life that bubbles over with joy and love. Now, hold that thought a minute.

The second lectionary text assigned for this second Sunday in Lent is from John 3, the story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. As you may know, the New Testament tends to be rather hard on the Pharisees, but not all of them; the Pharisees were not necessarily bad people. In fact, most of the Pharisees tried really hard to be good people; many were sincerely scrupulous and conscientious about trying to honor all the laws of God. Nicodemus is one Pharisee the New Testament portrays in a rather positive light. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin (*a council of seventy men chosen from among the people, sort of like an Israeli Senate*) ... which means he was more than likely well educated and accomplished, he was probably highly ethical, he was most likely held in esteem and respect by the people who put him into office ... he would have to be all that and more to rise to the Sanhedrin. But clearly this good man was searching for something more.

We're told Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Unlike other Pharisees we read about in the Gospels, Nicodemus apparently has no interest in arguing with Jesus, no interest in debating politics, taxation, or matters of Sabbath observance. It seems Nicodemus just wants to talk to Jesus. The traditional reason people have speculated as to why he came to Jesus at night has been that he was afraid of being seen with Jesus, as Jesus was making a lot of Pharisees angry ... but I don't think so. In fact, we see later in this gospel that Nicodemus was not at all afraid to be associated with Jesus (*e.g., in John 7, we find Nicodemus defending Jesus and confronting the Sanhedrin when they want to illegally arrest Jesus during the Feast of Tabernacles; and in John 19 he joins Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for an honorable burial, contributing 75 pounds of expensive myrrh and aloes*). Also, Christian tradition lists Nicodemus as a first century Christian martyr; in fact, he is, venerated as a saint by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. No, I don't think Nicodemus was afraid to be seen with Jesus.

I think Nicodemus goes to Jesus at night for the same reason many of us go to Jesus at night. Like the Pharisee Nicodemus, we, too, are trying our best to be good. We, too, are really trying to consistently do the right thing. And at the end of the day, when we are exhausted by trying to be good, and conscientious, and responsible, sometimes we lie there in bed conflicted by all the things we've done that day that just aren't good enough ... yes, we, too, are more ready to talk to Jesus at night. It is at nighttime we fitfully toss and turn with the discouraging realization that being good doesn't always seem to cut it; that in spite of our best efforts there are still difficulties we encounter, and at times we feel as flat and lifeless as a soda pop that has been left open on the counter too long ... we've lost our bubbles, our effervescence is gone ... that's when we are ready to have a conversation with Jesus. *"Jesus, I'm tired. I'm no saint, but I do try to fulfill my responsibilities. But there's always more to be done. There's always something left undone. There's always something happening that isn't right. There always seems to be someone I've failed. There's always someone I've hurt or neglected. Jesus, I need help."* Yes, like Nicodemus, we know about nighttime conversations with Jesus.

Whenever we've looked at this passage in years past, I've always liked to note how Nicodemus begins the conversation by sincerely complimenting Jesus. He respectfully addresses Jesus as Rabbi and as One who has obviously come from God. By the way, that's high praise when someone tells you it's obvious you've come from and/or are associated with God; you must be doing something right! But note: Giving compliments is just one of those things good people do! They remember to compliment others; they make it a point to affirm what is good and right and praiseworthy in others. In so doing, they are affirming the standards they try to live by as well; they want to affirm and encourage and promote the standards by which good people like them are striving to live. A quote by Leo Buscaglia: *"Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."*

Jesus replies to the compliment rather enigmatically, *"No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* Now, one Greek word is translated by the two words "born again;" the Greek word *"anōthen"* is a word that carries a double meaning. As you can see in the footnote in the pew Bibles, the double meaning is that this word can be translated as both *"born from above"* and *"born again"*. Bible translators typically choose one or the other of these interpretations ... born from above, or born again ... and footnote the other. Contrary to what one might think by its prolific use by many Christians over the years (*think Billy Graham, Charles Colson, President Jimmy Carter*), this phrase (*or, more correctly, this one Greek word*) only appears in one place in all the Scripture, right here. So, it's good to look at the context to see which might be the better translation Jesus intended to convey ... born from above, or born again.

If you think of it, being born is a rather passive process ... for the one being born, I mean (*not for the mother, of course!*). The one being born has little (*read: NOTHING*) to do with it! Last month we celebrated the twentieth and twenty-fifth birthdays of my two daughters, and next month we will celebrate the twenty-third birthday of my "only-begotten" son. Now, I was there when they were born. I can pretty much attest that none of them made a conscious decision and *chose* to be born. They weren't born because they responded to the obstetrician proclaiming, "YE MUST BE BORN!" They weren't coaxed into "making a decision" and then came forward out of the womb to "accept" life! No, birth was a gift of life they were *given* by someone who endured great sacrifice and a good deal of pain. And I think Jesus is telling Nicodemus this gift of God's Spirit is also a gift of life we receive "from above," from outside and beyond us and our efforts, a gift that comes through One who is about to endure great sacrifice and a good deal of pain to make this new life possible. Jesus tells the original "Nick at Nite" here that it is all about grace, grace from above, a gift of God's grace conveyed by His Spirit and through His Son who indeed has the power to make all things new!

When we read this chapter in John 3, it looks at first sight as if Nicodemus took the word in the second sense with something of a crude literalism, as he replies. *"How can anyone,"* he said, *"be born when he is old? Surely he can't enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"* But there may more to Nicodemus' reply than what we're reading here, and the older I get, the more I understand this. I don't think Nicodemus is engaging in some esoteric theological high-brow "religious speak;" I think he's speaking with a genuinely wistful yearning. *"Oh, how can one be born again, how can one start over, how can one as old and set in my ways as I am ever get a fresh start?"* Maybe in his heart there was a great longing, a longing many of us share; maybe he would just love to unwind the clock, to go back in time and decide things differently, do things differently, re-develop good and healthy and loving habits, to re-begin relationships that had gone bad. *"Oh, Rabbi, you talk about starting over, you talk about a new life, but in my experience it is impossible. At my age, it's even laughable! I'm too set in my ways, I've made too many mistakes, despite my best efforts I've hurt too many people. There is nothing I would like to do more; but you might as well tell me, a full grown man, to enter into my mother's womb and be born all over again."* I think this good man Nicodemus is voicing the universal human dilemma of the person who really wants to change but just finds it next to impossible, even laughable. However, the repeated message of the Bible is that with God, all things are possible! Again, look at Abram ... by the power of God's Spirit and in obedience to God's call, at age seventy-five he "starts over" and goes on to have a profound multi-generational and world-wide influence!

There's so much more that could be said about the words of Jesus in this encounter with Nicodemus, but time is short. I just like to wrap this up by reiterating that if I've learned nothing else in my years of ministry, I've learned this: We will never understand God until we get it through our heads that the God we worship is the most joyous Being in the universe. God made the world to delight in it, He made this world and all that is in it to share in His overflowing joy and love; and as Jesus tells Nicodemus, God loved this world so much that He sent His son that we might have life, effervescent life, full life, eternal life now and forever. He delights when we discover the delight of His good ways. God wishes to share His joy. As C. S. Lewis put it so well, *"Joy is the serious business of heaven!"*

The serious season of Lent is a time we reflect on this joyous business: that Jesus wants us to share in His Father's joy, and has gone to extraordinary lengths, serious lengths, even to the cross, to secure joy and life and hope for us, to bring joy down to us. In the words of that old hymn, *"Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven to earth come down!"* It is a gift, a gracious gift secured at great cost and born into our souls from above, as we lift our eyes to him in faith and belief.