

## “Living Life Backwards”

First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
March 8, 2020

**New Testament Lesson: John 3:1-6**

**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 25:1-5**

A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his father, “Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move this rock?” His father answered, “If you use all your strength, I am sure you can do it.” The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, “You were wrong, I can’t do it.” The father placed his arm around the boy’s shoulder and said, “No, son, you didn’t use all your strength – you didn’t ask me to help.”<sup>1</sup> For this, a young boy moving a huge rock would be a miracle, and in the end, the boy just couldn’t see it – he couldn’t see that God was ready to work that miracle through his father.

In today’s New Testament lesson, Nicodemus sees that God is working miracles through Jesus and – being a religious teacher – he’s sure he knows what they mean – that Jesus is a pretty special guy. That’s what he’s saying when he says, “Rabbi, 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.”

Here, Nicodemus is staring salvation, restoration, renewal, new life right in the face, and all he sees is a religious teacher, a rabbi, sent by God. Nicodemus can’t imagine the true miracle God is doing for his life and for all the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

So Jesus points him to a new source of knowledge and power, apart from the teachings and practices of the old ways. He says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God (the fulness of Christ as God incarnate) without being born from above.”

Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that you can’t see what God is doing in this world – what Jesus calls “the kingdom of God” – without embracing the Lord as Savior and being changed by God – what Jesus calls “being born from above.”

What does it mean to be born from above? In answering that, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” In other words, entering the world through natural birth only takes you so far – into the world.

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Wolpe in *Teaching Your Children About God*, as cited in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, ed. Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996), 447.

Entering the kingdom of God through the sacrament of water and Spirit – through our baptism – that’s what it’s all about, that’s what puts us on the path to see the miracles of God happening all around us, to be blessed by the Lord, and guided by the Holy Spirit.

We may be born into the world, but we are baptized into the kingdom of God. When I baptize someone, I always ask, “In what name shall you be baptized..., ...or your child be baptized?” And they answer by giving me the first and middle names; not the last name. They do this because ..., well, I tell them to.

But really, they do this because the first and middle names are given names, inspired by the Holy Spirit, while our last name is given by the world. Society gives us our last names – apart from the Holy Spirit – because that’s just how things work in this country; no other reason. You may think your last name is most important, but actually, what we think is most important, usually it’s not – unless we truly are putting God first, following Jesus ahead of all else, listening for the Holy Spirit to grace our lives.

Sadly, we – just like everyone else – are too tied to the ways of the world. We start our day running and only look to God when things go wrong, if we look to God at all. That’s as mixed up as thinking your last name is most important when, actually, your middle name was given to you in baptism, blessed by the Lord. Failing to put God first in your life-to start your day with the Lord is as mixed up as these real-life quotes, from real-life companies, announcing their real-life policies. Like this one:

“... Employees will be able to access the building only by using individual security cards, (beginning tomorrow). Pictures will be taken next Wednesday, and the cards will be available in two weeks.” That’s kind of backwards.

Here’s another: “This project is so important, we can’t let things that are more important interfere with it.” What’s that about?

And finally: “We know that communication is a problem, but the company is not going to discuss it with the employees.<sup>2</sup> Happens all the time.

”That’s the kind of mixed up world we live in. And yet, Jesus would have us live into the kingdom of God, to see it and engage it in how we live our lives. To really see what God is doing in this world – to see the kingdom of God, as Jesus says – we need to live life backwards from how society does things, we need to be born from above, born all over again.

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<sup>2</sup> "Dilbert" May 20, 1998, personal e-mail. (May 20, 1998).

We need to orient our lives around God, start with God each morning, step into our day alongside Jesus, go through the day guided by the Holy Spirit. Now that would be a true miracle, a miracle we can perform, with the help of the Father.

Just like a child moving a huge rock with the help of God there is nothing we can't take on or overcome if we learn to live life backwards from what society tells us – if we learn to put God first. Nicodemus came to know Jesus through the signs he performed, the miracles he did. And this is just how we come to know Jesus today.

We meet someone who is living life according to the teachings of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the love of God, and we think, "Wow! That's different." Or maybe it's you through whom someone comes to know the Lord. Or maybe people see how we're living and they look right through us, because we're just like everyone else.

The Lenten Season is a perfect time to begin living life backwards, to put God first, to be born all over again. If you want to experience miracles in your life, start with your relationship with God. Instead of charging headlong into each day, spend some time in prayer, read a little scripture, sit quietly and listen for the Holy Spirit to speak to you. That is what gives rise to the signs and miracles of a blessed life – the miracle of a long and joyous marriage, the miracle of inner peace amid that day's crisis, of selfless giving for the sake of another, the miracle of taking time out for Christian fellowship, of drawing on the Word of God at just the right time, the miracle of loving your neighbor and blessing your enemy.

These are true miracles, and they do indeed give rise to the kingdom of God, for you and your loved ones, and spreading out across the world. As you turn your life around to put God first – living life backwards – that's when you and others will come to know the Lord in a new and powerful way. Your family, they'll see a new you – born of the spirit. Your friends will see a new you – born of God. Strangers you meet and the enemies you keep will see a new you – reaching out to them with the power and grace of the Holy Spirit.

Being born all over again, being born from above means turning our lives around and facing this world with God by our side. That's the miracle that awaits you if you put God first today, and everyday. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray:

O God, when you talk of faith in the Scriptures, you say that we need but a little and we can do much. Deepen our faith.

Help us to pray in full belief that you can do miracles. Help us to live, trusting that you are with us each step of the way.

We know our faith will shake and falter, but continue to strengthen us and to let us see every moment that you are ever faithful.

We know we can trust you. Help us to do just that.

We pray your Spirit of comfort and provision for those who have lost loved ones in the Tennessee tornadoes, and those whose homes have been destroyed.

We pray your Spirit of healing and restoration, comfort and care for all those we continue to keep in prayer.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**