

March 8, 2020

**'I Can See Clearly Now!'**

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*John 3:1-17*

Are you wondering why I'm wearing these sunglasses? They remind me of all the glasses donated to the Lion's Club! You may not know that I have been a Lion – in fact, I was President of the Lion's Club in Sheffield, IL.. One of the Lion's missions is to help people in need to see better, to make their vision clearer, to provide opportunities for those who have little or no eyesight, who are blind.

Thanks to many people, donated glasses are given to people who need them, but either can't afford or have no access to a pair of glasses. You could say these will be 'New Eyes for the Needy!' Our gospel reading could also be titled 'New Eyes for the Needy,' but before we get to New Eyes, let's take a closer look at the fascinating conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, which you overheard a few moments ago.

Nicodemus, a religious leader comes to talk about spiritual things, and Jesus looks him right in the eye and says, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above – born anew, or born again as some translations put it. Nicodemus is totally confused!

Just how is **THAT** *spiritual*?! So he questions Jesus: "BORN AGAIN?! How can anyone be born after having grown older? I mean, can one enter a second time into their mother's womb and be born? GET REAL, JESUS!"

Notice again that Nicodemus seeks Jesus out for this conversation BY NIGHT....Nicodemus is REALLY in the dark! But he's not alone. We mainline Protestants really have a problem with this idea of being born again. If I had a dollar for every church member who over the last almost 30 years asked, "Just what is this 'born again' business,?" I'd have a lot of money!

Why does this idea about being born again leave US in the dark like Nicodemus? We sure don't talk about it very much – it's not often a part of our Church vocabulary! Actually, the gospels and the other books in our Christian Scriptures don't talk about it much either! Did you know that the phrase 'born again or born from above' is only mentioned 2x, and both times in today's gospel? You'd never know that by listening to some Christians! They are always talking about being BORN AGAIN.

Have you ever had someone ask you, "Have you been born again? When exactly did it happen?" Billy Graham said on TV once, "No matter what your church tells you, religious ritual is not enough. It's great to be baptized; it's great to be confirmed' it's great to be a member of a church, but it's not enough.

You MUST be born again!" Like Nicodemus, we just don't get it. We also stay in the dark, not able to see.

And like Nicodemus, we can get bogged down by biology rather than excited about theology. Can we be born again from our mother's womb? Of course not, Jesus is saying. We're not talking about the physical world here, We're talking about the spiritual world, a world that's more subtle and mysterious.

Jesus then says it's a lot like the wind: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it goes or where it comes from . That's the way it is with everyone who is born of the spirit."

And we still don't know everything about the wind, which is why meteorologists STILL can't positively predict the weather! It's why we get 'snowed in' in the winter, but also why predicted snowfalls don't happen. The wind is always changing! IT'S THIS WIND – the spirit wind – which can blow into your life (and mine) in ways so subtle that you hardly notice until one day you open your eyes and start to see things differently.

I know that spirit wind has blown and is still blowing in **my** life! One day, when I was in my twenties, my eyes were opened as I looked into my newborn son's eyes. I knew in that moment that I needed to go to college, then eventually I graduated from Seminary, and HERE I AM. Of course, the spirit wind had been blowing in my life before that eye-opening day, but I had not seen that direction for my life CLEARLY until then.

Another day, my eyes were opened to the fact that I was a child of God and did not deserve to be treated as I was in my abusive marriage. I had been in the dark for so long. Now I began to see other possibilities for my family and gained the strength to leave that broken marriage and become a healthy family with a single mom! That spirit wind had been blowing in mysterious ways to bring me to that 'eye opening' moment.

Decades later, my eyes saw a relationship in a new way. Dave and I had been acquaintances, then friends, for quite a long time. One day, seemingly out of the blue, the thought came into my head, like a voice from above or within: "You and Dave will be together someday, and it will be good." I kept the sound of that spirit wind, or epiphany, as I like to call it, in the back of my thoughts for some time. But, you see? It came true. Because after that moment, I began to see our relationship in a different light.

I read about a young man who found himself sitting in a high school classroom. It was career day and he was invited back to speak to the students

about his work. After his presentation, he decided, just for the fun of it, to sit in on some of the classes. In one class, they were studying American poetry. He remembers muttering under his breath: "I hated this stuff when I was in high school. I still hate it. What a waste of time."

On that particular day, the class was reading from Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem titled 'Richard Cory.' It's a poem about a successful, attractive, popular man, who nonetheless goes home one hot summer night and puts a bullet through his head. In that moment, as he heard that poem, the young man said to himself, "My God, I know people like Richard Cory!"

For the first time in his life, that young man had the truths of good literature speak to him. Suddenly, he was on a quest to reread all of the books and poems he'd only muddled through when he was a student. He's still at it! He's discovering for himself a passion for learning. That spirit which is like the wind is blowing him in directions he could not have predicted!

Changes come over people who let the fresh winds of God blow them in directions they might not have seen for themselves. People are given the chance to start over, people are given a second chance, even a third or fourth chance and more! It is, you see, as if they are born all over again!

And please notice where it all starts: not with people themselves – They can't be born again just by their own effort. Is there anyone who came into this world just by their own effort? OF COURSE NOT! It's a partnership: you have your mother to thank for that, as well as perhaps your father, a doctor, nurse or midwife. What YOU can do to is to be grateful and live your life in a way that honors the ones who, with you, gave you the gift of birth!

To be 'born again' is like that. You can't make it happen just on your own. It's too mysterious for that – it IS like the wind. It's God, who like a midwife gives you the gift...the chance to start over again. Sometimes you change gradually; sometimes it can seem quite dramatic and sudden. But one way or the other, that spirit blows!

I think that we make this whole business of being 'born again' too complicated! It's like being given a new pair of eyes. For part of your life, you look at the world one way. But then, one day, you start to realize that you're looking at things differently – through the eyes of faith. Now, we're back to talking about New Eyes – new eyes for the SPIRITUALLY needy. It's just as Jesus put it to Nicodemus: "No one can SEE the kingdom of God without being born from above....or born again."

This has always been one of my favorite conversations in the Bible: this one-on-one interchange between Nicodemus and Jesus about being born again. And the passage ends with a beautiful statement about God's mission: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Wow! To see the world like that – as deeply loved by God and in the PROCESS of being saved – is to be in partnership in the great work of redemption. For most of us, that WILL MEAN looking at the world with new eyes. Because remember, "NO ONE can see the kingdom of God without being born again!

AMEN.