

Overcoming the Fear of Change

2nd Weekend in Lent – Color: Purple – February 19/20, 2005

Sermon Background Study

“For God did not give us a spirit of fear,
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

John 3:1-5 and 19:38-39 (NRSV)

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

³⁸After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.

Luke 18:18-23 (NRSV)

¹⁸A certain ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.’” ²¹He replied, “I have kept all these since my youth.” ²²When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” ²³But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich.

Our fears come in many shapes and sizes. At times, it can be hard even to know exactly what it is that makes us so anxious. Today, we consider the stories of two men who were confronted by a change they could hardly comprehend. One, so I'd like to think, pushed through his fear and embraced the change, albeit reluctantly. The other simply turned away in sadness.

In the night

Nicodemus was a Pharisee¹ and a leader of the Jews. An important man. A man with much to protect. He had heard the strange story of how a man from Nazareth, named Jesus, had changed water into wine during a large wedding party in Cana (John 2:1-12). And Nicodemus knew that Jesus was the cousin of that wild man, John, who had been baptizing people out at the Jordan River. But Nicodemus’ world had been rocked during the most recent Passover Festival in Jerusalem. There, this Jesus from Nazareth had charged into the temple courtyards one morning, turning over tables and generally disrupting the sacrificial industry² for a short while (John 2:13-22). In the days following, Jesus had astounded people with healings and other miracles. He had taught with an authority beyond that even claimed by the Pharisees. “Who is he?” the crowds asked. Nicodemus wondered himself. Feeling his heart strangely warmed and his mind perplexed, Nicodemus decided to approach Jesus, seeking some sort of explanation. But Nicodemus couldn’t just walk up to him. He had a reputation to protect. Already, some of the Pharisees were talking about the need to confront Jesus. Fearing the consequences of a meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus took the safe route. He went to Jesus at night ~ so no one would know.³

¹The Pharisees were an important group of Jews for nearly two centuries before the destruction of the temple in 70AD. The Pharisees were committed to the careful keeping of God’s Law and waited, with great anticipation, for the coming of the Messiah, God’s kingdom, and the bodily resurrection of the dead. In their religious lives, some Pharisees followed a path of piety while others pursued political, even revolutionary, agendas.

²The temple in Jerusalem was the centerpiece of the Jewish religion. During Passover, the great celebration of liberty and salvation, the temple and its courtyards were turned into a charnal house as thousands of Jews came to purchase animals that would then be slaughtered by the temple priests in sacrificial rituals.

³Obviously, I’m using a little informed imagination to flesh out the portrait of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus left his meeting with Jesus as perplexed and confused as when he arrived. Still, he wondered, what did Jesus really mean by, “You must be born from above.” Jesus had even seemed amazed that Nicodemus had *not* understood these things! Yet, Nicodemus was glad that he had overcome his fear and had asked for the meeting. Later, at a meeting of some Pharisees and temple priests, Nicodemus would stand to defend Jesus, urging that he be heard by the leaders before they judge him (John 7:50-52). And much later still, when it seemed that Jesus’ entire ministry had come crashing down upon a Roman cross, Nicodemus would join Joseph of Arimathea in caring for Jesus’ body. In a lavish expression of devotion, Nicodemus would bring a large quantity of expensive incense and perfume to anoint Jesus’ body (John 19:38-39).

We meet Nicodemus only three times in John’s Gospel. He is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. We can’t know whether Nicodemus would have considered himself a follower of Jesus before the crucifixion. And we can’t know whether he was counted among the believers after Jesus’ resurrection. But we do know that Nicodemus was deeply affected by his encounter with Jesus. He could have easily have been overcome by his fears, refusing to approach Jesus even at night. But Nicodemus pressed on, open to the notion of a God much larger and very different from the God he had known.

Fear and sadness

In our second story today, we meet another important man. He is both wealthy and powerful. Like Nicodemus, he will be confronted by a God larger than he ever imagined. But unlike Nicodemus, he will simply turn away, unable to overcome his fear.

We don’t know why this important man asks the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Perhaps he is sincere. Perhaps he is simply looking for an endorsement. Regardless, he gets the question wrong. One does not “do” anything to “inherit.” Either the man wasn’t paying attention or had stepped

gods too small

Last week, I mentioned J.B. Phillips’ book, *Your God Is Too Small*. He wants us to see that often our “god” is simply too small to enable us to overcome the fears and anxieties of life. Here is one example of a too small god.

Resident Policeman – For some people, the closest they ever get to God is their own conscience, imagining that the small voice telling them right from wrong is God’s voice. But, of course, it is not. Our consciences are our moral sense and, like our other senses, our moral sense can be trained well or poorly. When our moral sense is trained by the commonsensical street smarts of this world, our moral sense ends up twisted. We may hear our conscience, but it is unable to guide us in what is truly right and wrong. We might even end up concluding that there is no right or wrong, but only opinion.

Instead, our moral sense must be informed by the God who made us, who is revealed in Jesus and in the pages of Scripture read by the believing community. When we allow our conscience and our heart to be shaped by the God-Who-Is, we hear not the “feeble voice of the half-blind thing we call a conscience,” but the voice of God.

away when Jesus taught that we are to receive the kingdom like children (Luke 18:15-17, the verses immediately preceding this story). Like children? There is no place here for merit or achievement. The inheritance is a gift which cannot be earned.

Nonetheless, Jesus lets the man go ahead with his “doing” reminding him that he knows the Law – no adultery, no murder, no theft, honor your parents, etc. The man believes that he has “done” all this. Surely, the man is feeling pretty good about himself at this point, eternal life is in his grasp! But then Jesus asks him to “do” one more thing: sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. Luke tells us only that the man “became sad, for he was very rich.”

What a change Jesus asks of this man. Sell all that he has! Surely Jesus can’t mean what he says. What about the man’s financial independence? His financial security? Jesus promises the man a large bank account in heaven, but what about his T-bills on earth?

Yes, this is a story about our attachment to possessions and our imagined independence. But, it is also a story about trust. The man trusts what he can put his hands on, namely his money. He professes to trust God, but it is a timid trust, a trust that is unable to sustain him when he faces the challenge posed to him by Jesus. The change Jesus demands is simply too much for him. Jesus has exposed the man to be a person of little faith – or at least little faith in God, for he seems to have much faith in his possessions. In essence, the man is an idolator. He has chosen to trust in his wealth rather than in God.

It is our faith in, our trust of, the LORD God that sustains us through the fears and anxieties of our lives.

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul.

O my God, in you I trust.

(from Psalm 25)

Daily Bible Readings

(five psalms on trusting the LORD God, the God-Who-Is)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 3 Trust God in the face of adversity</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 19 This is the God-Who-Is! The God who creates and teaches. Who is our rock and our redeemer.</p>
<p>Day 3 Psalm 25 A prayer for guidance and deliverance</p>	<p>Day 4 Psalm 77 Our trust in God is grounded upon not only who he is, but also what he has done.</p>
<p>Day 5 Psalm 146 Don't trust princes and mortals. Trust God!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy info and registration is now on-line!

Information on the Spring Bible Academy session is now available on-line. We have another great line-up of classes, including two women-only classes to be led by Rev. Kathryn Self. Classes include *Get a Life: Debunking the Six Myths in the Quest for Contentment* (with Rev. Self), *First Place: Bringing Balance to the Physical, Emotional, Spiritual and Mental* (with Rev. Self), *Christianity and Other Religions* (with Eric Roberson), *Acts: A New Spirit and a New World* (with Scott Engle), *Genesis: In the Beginning, God* (with Frankey Commer), *The Gospel of John - Part 2* (with Monty Moore), and *The Spirit-Filled Life* (with Scott Engle).

Most classes will begin the week after Easter, the week of March 28.

Please register early.

To learn more and to register, simply go to www.standrewccl.org

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Our first story today is about Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night, in secret. What do you think made Nicodemus fearful? Have you ever been in a similar situation? How did things turn out? We aren't told much about Nicodemus' life after his encounter with Jesus, but he seems to have taken other risks for Jesus. What is your impression of Jesus' effect on Nicodemus? Do you think Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus? What does this story tell us about overcoming fear, particularly the fear of change?
2. The rich ruler who came to Jesus in our second story was unwilling to surrender his possessions. Why do you think this is? Was he attached to his stuff? Was he unwilling to give up the security of a fat bank account? Perhaps he had big responsibilities to care for others in his family. . . . Most people strive to build financial security. Do you think we shouldn't? If we do work toward such security, where can we go wrong? How we go about gaining the wealth? Losing perspective? Many of us have at one time in our lives been pretty poor. I don't mean poverty-stricken, but simply not having much stuff or much money. What do you think your reaction would be if Jesus asked you to voluntarily sell all you have and return to a life of few possessions, small income, and a meager bank account? Could you do it?
3. *Your God Is Too Small*. Most people are familiar with the phrase, even if they don't realize it is the title of a book. Just based upon the title, what do you think Phillips means? In what ways might your own conception of God be "too small." What does this have to do with our fears and anxieties?