

WGUMC March 16, 2014
"Life in the Birth Canal"

Lent 2
John 3:1-17

When the weather gets this warm, I start thinking of high school seniors suffering from senioritis. But the fever starts much earlier than this. Students take exams and visit colleges in their junior year, all the while thinking, "I can't believe they're going to make me go through another whole year of high school!" Everyone is telling them that their life is just about to begin, and so, by the time they get to be a senior, most of them are already done with the place and ready to get on with their life.

That's how it's supposed to happen. "Real life" is supposed to begin after you graduate. But try telling that to the college graduates who have to move back home because they can't get a job or they can't afford a place to live. In my generation, we didn't have to do that, and I feel really bad for this generation. We promised them new life and here they are stuck in the birth canal.

If it's any consolation, young people just starting out are not the only ones who feel that way. We can get stuck in the birth canal at any time of our life. In fact, it's much worse the older you get. Then it's not so much that we're stuck waiting for life to begin. It's that we get stuck not believing that our life can change. We're stuck with a body we don't like, in a marriage that doesn't work, with a job we can't stand, a mortgage we can't pay, or a disease we can't cure. When we graduated from high school, the world was full of boundless opportunity. Now that we're much older, we start to see a world of endless impossibilities. Welcome to the world of Nicodemus.

Who is Nicodemus? Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader among the Jews, but he wasn't one of those who were violently opposed to Jesus. In this story, Nicodemus is more curious about him, so he secretly comes to Jesus in the middle

of the night. I think we're curious about Jesus, too. And we have our own ways of sneaking up on him.

We may believe, like Nicodemus, that Jesus can do great signs and work great miracles. Nicodemus tells Jesus that he knows that he is a teacher who has come from God, because no one can do the signs that Jesus does apart from the presence of God. So Nicodemus believes in miracles. He just doesn't believe that they apply to him. And I think we're a lot like him.

Throughout our lives, we may have seen miracles happen to other people. And we've heard about folks who have turned around, picked themselves up off the ground, climbed out of that pit to the top of that mountain and glimpsed that glory. But somehow it seems as if the really good news is always someone else's story.

We read our Bibles and may well believe that Jesus healed a leper, fed a multitude, even raised a dead man, but we have

our doubts about whether he could do much for us today.

Maybe he rocked *his* world, but he's not going to change *ours* much. The Nicodemus in us thinks as much.

But Jesus says to Nicodemus and to everyone stuck in the birth canal, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God—no one can see the changes I am making in this world, let alone live there—until they themselves are born from above."

God's kin-dom is a truly transformed world. It's a world based on love, not fear; based on truth, not a lie; based on righteousness, not injustice; based on peace, not endless war. And we can live in God's world right here on this earth, right now—as long as we are willing to be transformed, as long as we are willing to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus [Phil 2], as long as we are willing to be conformed to the image of God's Son [Rom 8], as long as we are ready to clothe ourselves

with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness [Eph 4].

What are we waiting for? When it comes to our spiritual lives, a lot of us get stuck in the rebirth canal. We either don't believe that such a transformation is possible for us or we do believe and we're not ready for it. Like a baby past her due date, we want to stay put, even though it's dark and cramped and a little stuffy in here, because it's too darned cold and scary out there. There are blinding lights and loud noises and unfamiliar faces.

Besides that, we know that someone will come along and cut the cord and then there's no going back where we came from. Now, since our first birth was so filled with mortal danger, why would anyone want to risk another one? Yet, there's God, our spiritual mother, who is still laboring hard for our rebirth.

Spiritual births, just like physical ones, can be pretty scary and exhausting. But they are oh so worth it. Take it from Alison Praisewater. She's home in Wisconsin right now and sends her greetings.

For those of you who don't know Alison, a little back story. Alison was born on New Year's Day in 1984. She grew up in Willow Glen, was baptized and confirmed in this church. She attended Sunday School and youth group. Her dad tells me that, as a child, she always said her prayers, was always concerned about whether she was pleasing God. In 2002, she graduated from Branham High School and enrolled at San Jose State. During her junior year, she studied in Scotland. And when she came back, she graduated with a degree in Child and Adolescent Development. She talked about doing children's ministry with Susan. She talked about youth ministry with Lisa. She worked for a time as Lisa's paid assistant and then as the volunteer youth director for the Family Community Church in

South San Jose. What she loved to do and was good at was organizing trips to camp and service projects. So, in 2011, Lisa helped to hook her up with Next Step Ministries out of Madison, Wisconsin. Since that time, Alison has been traveling around, setting up sites for mission projects and supervising mission teams all over the United States and in the Caribbean. That's how she got to Haiti. And that's where it happened.

Now, when we talk about people who need spiritual rebirth, Alison is not the sort of person we have in mind. After all, she was raised in a very religious family. She participated regularly in a faith community. She was trying to serve God through her ministry. As far as her background is concerned, she has a lot in common with Nicodemus. With such a full life already, where was there room for rebirth?

I asked her about that in an email a few days ago. Here is her response:

"I think that the New Birth I have experienced is that I finally have begun to understand how to live like Jesus. As you

said, I grew up in the church, always knowing who Jesus was and admiring Him and his teachings. Unfortunately, that didn't always mean I lived like him.

"As I continued to work in the field of missions though, I [gained] a better understanding of how important it was to actually act like Jesus. I remember the words He spoke after washing his disciples feet, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." [John 13:17] Or the words in 1 John when referring to seeing those in need, "How can the love of God be in you," if you do not help. [1 John 3:17]

"When arriving in Haiti and experiencing life the way the children do, something new was altered in me. I realized that Jesus would have no problem loving these children with everything inside of him. And I felt the need to do the same. I cannot say why it finally hit me in Haiti. Maybe it was my heart for children that finally made sense. But I feel like there is nothing I want to do more than love these children with everything I have, just like Jesus would. Jesus would see the need for love and fill it. I want to do the same.

"What does the kingdom of God look like in Haiti? What a question! I will have to think about this one long after this email...

"I do know though that if the truth of the gospel can be communicated and believed, that the kingdom of God will invade Fond Blanc. I desire for the children to know intimately and personally who Christ is. Not a powerful God who is distant and far, who helps his "poor children," but a personal Savior who knows them intimately and walks alongside them.

"I have been thinking very much about the God of immeasurably more- and that is the God that I see working in Haiti. And I believe that these children are capable of so much more than people (even me) give them credit for. I cannot wait to begin putting opportunities in front of them."

Alison and a small team have been putting together Project Fond Blanc, named after the small mountain town in Haiti where she is working at an orphanage that was constructed after the big earthquake there. We'll hear more about it at our Lay Leadership Council on Wednesday night. Or you can go to fondblanc.org and see some amazing photos and video. She concludes her email with the words, "I feel so blessed to have a church family like [Willow Glen UMC]!" Alison, born on New Year's Day and at age 30, still ready to be reborn.

It may be a long time since we were 30, but no matter our age or how long it's been since we graduated, no matter where we are on the journey of faith, the truth is that God is always trying to give birth to us. Though we have gray hair and wrinkles, God's labor is not yet over. Right now we see all the risk. So, in order to see the beauty, we're going to have to let God push us all the way down that rebirth canal and out into the brave new world we call the kin-dom of God. See you there.