***LEAVING YESTERDAY BEHIND YOU***

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Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:16-19 and John 3:1-17

A lot of good ideas and the inspiration for some sermons come at odd, unexpected, and sometimes surprising moments – in a dream, while driving, on a morning run, in the middle of a sermon (which may overlap with the dream for some of you), or even in the shower. Last week I heard a corporate CEO share some thoughts about innovation in the workplace; she said that she had heard so many employees claim that their best ideas came to them in the shower, that she considered building a line of showers in the office for employees to jump in and out of for inspirational thinking! Maybe it is our subconscious minds at work, or maybe it is the blooming of an idea planted some time ago that has been germinating unnoticed, or maybe it is the work of the Holy Spirit, but every now and then a great thought or good idea or “aha moment” catches us unexpectedly.

It was such a moment that gave birth to the sermon title for today. As I was driving down I-81 to Lexington for the presbytery meeting early Tuesday morning a John Denver song came on the radio, a song that I had not heard in a long time: *Rocky Mountain High*.[[1]](#endnote-1) In the first stanza of the song I heard something new in familiar lyrics that jumped out at me as Jesus’ words to Nicodemus were fermenting unconsciously in my brain:

*He was born in the summer of his 27th year*

*Coming home to a place he’d never been before.*

*He left yesterday behind him,* ***you might say he was born again***

*You might say he found a key for every door….*

The song is about a young man discovering new life in the mountains of Colorado and finding a whole new perspective amid the pristine beauty of

a clear blue mountain lake,

towering mountains from whose peaks he can look down on clouds,

lightning storms that rain fire in the sky,

and the shadows from starlight that are “softer than a lullaby.”

In that beautiful corner of the earth he finds a new home, a place to talk with God, a place that reshapes his view of the world and his place in it. That transformation is described in those words that caught my attention: *He left yesterday behind him,* ***you might say he was born again.***

*Born again* – those were the words that so frustrated Nicodemus in his late night encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, but unlike many of his fellow Pharisees, he regarded Jesus as an inspired teacher, a man from God whose miracles proved that God was with him. He came seeking insight into this man from God, but before he could even ask a question, Jesus offered a cryptic statement about the kingdom of God, and Nicodemus could not figure out what the heck Jesus was talking about.

*No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.*

Those were Jesus’ words, and for Nicodemus it was a mystery of biology – how could one be born a second time? It was physically, practically, biologically impossible. Nicodemus tried to understand what Jesus was saying, but the visual image kept getting in the way – how would you do that? He took literally what Jesus was telling him, and in so doing he missed completely what Jesus was saying.

When Daniel was a young tot, my in-laws were visiting us in Carlisle. In the course of a meal, Daniel picked up his cup to take a sip of milk and continued to hold it in his hand while he chattered away. It was a disaster waiting to happen, so my father-in-law in an unusually adroit move on his part, said, “Daniel, put your milk in your coaster!” “Okay,” said Daniel, and promptly poured his milk into the coaster. “Don’t be so literal!” my father-in-law said. But to us, he added, “Well, he did what I told him.”

“Don’t be so literal” is what Jesus might have said to Nicodemus to help him understand what Jesus meant by *born again*. But instead Jesus says, “*You must be born of water and spirit*.” Jesus is speaking of two births. You must be born physically and spiritually; you must be born on earth in that watery splash with which you enter the world and then born anew in the power of the Spirit. You must be born and then born again, born and then born anew. “How can this be?” Nicodemus asks.

“Listen to *Rocky Mountain H*igh,” Jesus might have suggested. “Then you might understand.” Being born again is, as John Denver sings, *leaving yesterday behind you*. It is making a fresh start and thus gaining a whole new perspective on life and your place in it. It is becoming a new person, a faithful person born anew, and in so doing you must leave yesterday behind you. You must leave behind yesterday’s old ways, yesterday’s old priorities, yesterday’s old grudges, and yesterday’s old self in order to embrace a new way and a new you! You must leave behind hate, racism, bigotry, and xenophobia to embrace love for all people. You must leave behind “me first” and “America First” and “Anything Else First” in order to put God first. You must leave behind the pursuit of more wealth and more accolades and more things in order to seek the Kingdom of God. Then you might catch a glimpse of that divine Kingdom for which you seek! “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” Jesus asks Nicodemus. Two thousand years later he might ask the same of us. *Do you not yet understand these things?*

If we are to grasp anything of the mystery of faith and recognize the Kingdom of God, then we must reach beyond literalism and be reborn into a new reality under the reign of God. The Kingdom of God is not a place where we are trying to go; it is the reign of God under which we are called to live, a way that reflects God’s will for us. That way is the way that Jesus showed us in his life, death, and resurrection; it is the way of love. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” writes John. Jesus came to us because God loved the world – not just some of the world, not just the Christians-to-be, not just the saints – God loved the whole world. And the purpose of Jesus coming into our midst was not to condemn the world, but to save it. It is that good news we proclaim and that new way we are called to embrace, a new life under the reign of God.

Traditions that speak freely of being “born again” often look to some specific time of rebirth, a moment when Jesus is accepted as Lord. But being born again is not an intellectual exercise; it is an *aha!* moment when life is suddenly new. For some people it happens in a flash – an *aha!* experience of Christ that changes everything. But for many others it is far more gradual – like the birth of a colt who is born in a tangle of legs, neck, head and torso that take time to emerge into the world. Even then the colt is a little wobbly on its feet for awhile. For some of us that is how we are born anew – over time, under the nurture of loving parents and faithful saints who help us find our feet and our faith and a faithful way of living. Such a rebirth, whether in a moment or across a lifetime, is the work of the Spirit who sparks faith in us and opens our eyes to a world filled with new priorities and possibilities that are God’s priorities and possibilities for us.

In the great mystery of faith that we have struggled to grasp across the centuries, Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might believe in him and so be born again, born anew with yesterday’s sins behind us. We are urged to embrace the hope and promise that Christ offers in that great mystery of faith that is crucifixion and Resurrection. Jesus says it is like the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses in the wilderness – all who gazed upon it were saved from the deadly bites of the snakes that afflicted them. No one could say why that saved them, they simply believed and looked and lived. That is the invitation for you and for me, an invitation to believe and trust in God and seek God’s Kingdom, to leave yesterday behind us and embrace a new future with the promise of eternal life that gives us hope each and every day. With that hope, that promise, that faith, we are born again, and the world is indeed new!

What then of Nicodemus and his struggle with being *born again*? He goes back into the night with a lot to think about and ponder in his heart. Later he appears briefly among the Pharisees as they debate having Jesus arrested. He speaks briefly, and is heard from no more. But he does do one more thing, an important thing, a reborn kind of thing that Luke remembers. After Jesus was crucified and his body taken down from the cross and given to Joseph of Arimathea for burial:

*Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they – Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus - laid Jesus there*.

It was Nicodemus who laid Jesus’ broken body to rest. He left yesterday behind him, you might say he was born again! How about you? Amen

1. *Rocky Mountain High*, lyrics by John Denver and Mike Taylor [↑](#endnote-ref-1)