

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • MARCH 1, 2020
THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

The Litany
Based on Psalm 62

For God alone, our souls wait in silence.

Our hope comes from God.

*We stand on the rock that is holy, mighty, and pure
and there find our peace and strength.*

Let us pray:

**We know your power through steadfast love,
O God. Draw us near that we might become
just as steadfast. Amen.**

The Scripture
John 3:1-9

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "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. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

The Message
All Groan Up: Transition
Mark Briley

Synopsis: Life is full of transition. We get that. We even anticipate it. Even so, timing often creeps up on us, surprises us, and leaves us wondering, "*What just happened?*" The season of Lent is a season of transition. Advent brings us to the birth of Jesus. The season of Epiphany invites us to live into the newness of all of that just before Lent reintroduces itself to our lives saying, "*Oh, I'm sorry. You weren't ready for this?*" As we transition into this deeply reflective season, let's commit to being open to whom God is inviting us to be on the other side of Easter. It all begins with a willingness to start again.



Transition. There's a little 'ick' factor for many when it comes to the word, "*Transition.*" While there are many positive transitions in our lives, some of us pull to mind some of the more difficult transitions we've experienced. We even caveat some seasons, with an attempt to soften its harshness, with the phrase, "*Well, it's a time of transition.*"

I heard a colleague share a story about a couple in her church. The husband was retiring from his work after a long and fruitful career. His wife was looking forward to the new phase of life they'd experience together. About a week into retirement, the wife calls her pastor and says, "*You've got to do something. He's following me around the house with a clipboard!*" The pastor noted that both individuals are very healthy, capable, loving people.

No matter who we are, we can struggle with transitions. But... transitions can also be deeply meaningful, magical almost. They can come with challenge but the best kind of challenge – one we know is needed and necessary and healthy and transformative. It will be hard, disciplined work, but it will be a transition more than worthy of the effort. May that be this season for you – a transition into the season of Lent.

The season of Lent is a season of groaning. Just like we are prone to groan as our body ages, matures, and alters over time, our spirits groan as they shift, grow and mature.

Many of you joined us last Wednesday night for our Ash Wednesday service that launched us well into this season of forty-days (plus six Sundays) of navigating the depths of our souls in a time of discovery and re-discovery. It is a time that mimics Jesus forty-days in the wilderness; fasting, facing great temptation, and being mindful of his deepest sense of soul as he transitioned into his public ministry that forever changed the world.

Culturally speaking, the season of Lent was known to most as the time at school when the cafeteria menu every Friday was a fish sandwich. Others give up chocolate or something like that in theory to practice self-deprivation as an act of spiritual discipline. Some are more interested in shedding a few pounds. Our Catholic brothers and sisters tend to take this season more seriously when it comes to specific practices or

disciplines though some of us Protestants have come to truly appreciate the depth of the season and how it can shape our spirit in deeper ways.

With all the buzz about Millennials fleeing the church, it is interesting how that generation is engaging some practices associated with Lent. The Barna Group, a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization that conducts primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, and the like, released a study in 2015 finding that while 72% of adult Christians are aware of the Christian tradition of fasting during Lent, only 17% have practiced it in the previous three years. Catholics upped this percentage a great deal as 65% of them participated in the discipline. Most Protestants did not. Interestingly enough, while the study suggests many more Boomers attend worship more regularly than Millennials, a greater percentage of Millennials shared in the Lenten practice of fasting – some 20%. This seems to parallel other research suggesting a surge in the number of Protestant Millennials interested in rites and ceremonies of the faith. A professor of theology and culture at Multnomah University, Dr. Paul Metzger, said, “[Millennials] want to go deep because they often feel like life is shallow. Tradition is a way they can connect to something beyond themselves.”¹

Benjamin Keaster is a 27-year-old social worker from Spring Arbor, Michigan. He never observed Lent while growing up in an evangelical, protestant congregation. Five years ago, however, he felt an emptiness in his faith. He discovered the gift of spiritual ritual and loved the way it helped re-set his sense of connection to God. Where the season of Lent meant no change in faith practice the first twenty plus years of his life, the season now means eating no meat, no dairy, fasting on certain days and attending additional worship services with prescribed Lenten behaviors such as lying prostrate before one another in a sign of repentance. “*Fasting is always hard,*” Keaster said, noting how he dreads going to bed hungry. “*We try [in our culture] to keep the feast and the holiday parties, but you realize after you’ve done this for a few years that you can’t really feast without fasting. You need to have both.*”²

He seems to note what we may be getting at today – without some behavior marking any spiritual transition, our desire to grow in our faith, to go deeper in our relationship with Christ, is hard to experience or fully appreciate. In what ways will this season stir your soul anew? It is a time of discovery from the inside out, culminating in the joyful fulfillment of our greatest expectancy – resurrection. Join us for the twists and turns of mind, body, and soul as we traverse the season with the groaning pains that come with spiritual growth. It is why we’re calling this series, “*All Groan Up.*” Are you up for putting in the effort? Such is a daily challenge for all of us. It was certainly a challenge for a man named Nicodemus – a prominent leader among the Jews and part of the Pharisee sect in Jesus’ day.

¹ <http://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/christianity/millennials-observe-lenten-fast-at-surprising-rates>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/28/modern-lent-observances-r_n_829330.html

It was a big deal to be a Pharisee. They were among the most well-respected folks in the land. They were a part of what was known as a *chaburah*, or brotherhood.³ They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the scribal law. What did that mean? To the Jewish people, the Law was the most sacred thing in all the world. They believed it to be the perfect word of God and the Pharisees were on the law like your classmate who was a dedicated hall monitor in High School made sure the rules of the hallway were fully respected. The name Pharisee itself meant, “*Separated One*” – they distanced themselves from the casually religious to say this effort was worth every moment of every day of their lives. They loved the law. It was life to them.

It’s sort of like the difference between being a fair-weather jogger – heading out for a little jog when the weather is nice – and a totally tuned-in runner training just so for the race of her life. My wife is such a disciplined runner. My favorite moment on every race day she participates in is the moment she texts me this picture well before the sun rises on that day: Occasionally, out of the blue, she’ll send me this one, too. And... as it turns out, she just signed our whole family up to run the Heart of America marathon relay in support of our El Salvador ministry partner, ENLACE.



Let’s do this!

This meme worthy enthusiasm was Nicodemus’ spirit about honoring the Law of God in his life, and I respect the heck out of him for it. I feel a kindred spirit with Nicodemus – enough so that I’m going to call him Nico for short. He’s a reasonable guy best I can tell, and with Jesus now on the scene in his area, Nico is intrigued enough to go to him and say, “*Jesus – there’s something about you that I know is of God. Can we talk?*”

Do you understand his courage in doing this? Nico is a well-to-do guy. We know he’s got some means as he cares for Jesus body after the crucifixion by bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes that weighed about one hundred pounds (John 19:39). Only a person with some wealth would-could have brought that. He’s likely living comfortably, he’s morally attuned, and a disciplined faith-keeper of the law. Why risk this controversial association with a troublemaker like Jesus? Why consider a new thought? A new hope? A new possibility? Stick with what you already got.

Philip Gulley, a Quaker author, challenged this notion of staying the course and not attempting to expand our understanding in fear of what that may require of us. He said,

³ Exegetical support for this passage comes from William Barclay’s commentary on The Gospel of John. The Westminster Press. 1975.

“Nowhere is stale thought celebrated more than in religion. In no other field is intransigence elevated as a virtue. If our doctor didn’t read another word after graduating from medical school, we would find another doctor. If an astronomer didn’t let her understanding of the cosmos change after the images from the Hubble Space telescope were published, we’d rightly conclude she was no longer a credible authority on space. But let a Christian hold fast to his old-time religion, and we will applaud his lethargy, and seek his opinion on matters of faith. When he dies, we will laud his refusal to change and urge others to emulate him. Though he has not exercised a single brain cell to advance our understanding of God and has happily let the moss of tired thought cover his intellect, we will admire his simple faith.”⁴

What a challenging word, but one I think gets at the faithful inquiry of Nicodemus. He’s eager to connect with God and he’s willing to step more deeply into the possibilities of God as Jesus has begun to reveal in his time and place. And so, he risks all reputation and all comfort to seek out Jesus and say, *“Who are you and what does that mean for my understanding of God?”*

Jesus meets him in a back alley some night – maybe they slip into the *Barred Owl* just off downtown Jerusalem to chat over an Old Fashioned. Nico says to Jesus, *“You are God connected no doubt – there’s no way you can do what you’re doing without an inside track to the very nature of God.”* Jesus says, *“Ding, ding, ding! You’re absolutely right.”* Jesus goes further, *“Take it from me, Nico, unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see that I’m pointing to God’s kingdom.”* “Wait, wait,” Nico says, *“Born from above? What’s that? I’m a grown man and my mom would be less-than-enthused about having to deliver me all over again as an adult. Born from above? Talk to me Jesus.”* Jesus takes a sip of his drink and leans in: *“Listen closely. I’m talking about the kingdom of God here. Unless a person submits to this original creation – the ‘wind hovering over the water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life – it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom.”* He goes on, *“When you look at a baby, it’s just that; a body you can look at and touch. Cute, right? But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch – the Spirit of God – and that person then becomes a living spirit themselves.”*

By this time, the nachos have arrived, and Nico dips his chips into some salsa and is trying to soak this all in. He’s reviewing his entire life’s commitment to the law – what he’s studied, what he has practiced, what his *chaburah* – his brotherhood of fellow Pharisees -- have shared with him, and his own integrity to his calling. Jesus waits. The guy at the piano bar is offering a mediocre rendition of Billy Joel’s *“We Didn’t Start the Fire.”* And then Nicodemus responds... maybe even almost under his breath as if to himself... *“How does this happen? How can this be?”*

⁴ From Gulley’s book entitled, “Unlearning God,” as he shared the quote via social media. <http://www.philipgulley.com/>

Therein lies the question of our own faith journey. *“Born from above? Me? How?”* Are we afraid of that question? Do we think, *“Well – that question doesn’t apply to me – I’ve been in church my whole life. This isn’t my first Lenten rodeo.”* Are we more apt to look at someone else and think, *“That person right there! I hope they’re listening because they certainly need to be born again.”* But not me. Not me. Not me. Not me?

Perhaps, however, that is precisely the time when we need most of all... to be born from above. This isn’t about belief as much as it is about relationship. Richard Rohr says that *“God is much more a dynamic verb than a static noun. God is constant flow. You don’t even need to understand it intellectually or theologically to participate in the flow of God. You are already there. Within your heart, body, and mind is an implanted flow toward life, goodness, love, communion, and connection. ‘Sin,’”* he says, *“is quite simply any resistance to that flow.”*⁵

Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Spirit of God moves like this too – mysteriously like the wind. Our sin is to resist the dynamic of the Spirit that is nudging us to go deeper. The Trinitarian view of God – the dynamic of God, Christ, and Spirit – is to say, *“In the beginning is the relationship.”* Rohr says, *“When we start with God as relationship, we begin the spiritual journey on a very different foundation. This foundation is not static but continually evolving and creating new forms of communion and interdependence.”* What is holding you back from being born again? What comfort must you risk, what reputation must you risk, what *“I’ve-never-done-it-that-way”* spirit do you need to release in order to be born from above again or maybe truly for the very first time?

I have a dear, dear, friend and mentor in faith who is constantly attuned to ways his spirit needs to be born anew in Christ. He’s in his mid-seventies and has done some of the most extraordinary things in his life. Every time I’m with him, I learn of some new experience he had and am in awe of the ways it has shaped his spirit and the lives of others. Recently he shared about the death of his father. He passed away some time ago now – decades. His father was cremated, and my friend said, *“I wanted to bury his ashes somewhere I could see him once in a while. Have I told you where he is buried?”* “No,” I said. He buried his father’s remains under the “D” of the famous Hollywood sign in Los Angeles. He said, *“Do you know how many times that darn sign is shown on television?”* He sees his dad often.



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His relationship with his dad held a lot of tension, and there had remained a lot of unresolved feelings in his spirit in connection with his dad. As a child, his dad took him

⁵ Rohr quotes as discovered in his daily meditations shared by the Center for Action and Contemplation. <https://cac.org/>

often to the national parks in the United States, spending weeks on end in these parks in the summers. *"I took those experiences for granted,"* he said to me. *"I just thought that's what everyone did in the summer."* Ready to heal from some of the wounds left from his relationship with his dad, my friend decided the best approach would be to express his gratitude to his dad for giving him the love and appreciation of God's creation. National Parks held the richness of their history – the times he felt closest to his dad -- so he thought that was the place to make amends as well. He could pick one National Park but that's not my friend's style. He picked all of them. Fifty-nine United States National Parks. In just a few months' time, he made his way to each and every one of them and at one point in each park, he would kneel, build a small altar out of stones and pray thanksgiving to God – for creation and for his father's introduction to such sacred spaces. Fifty-nine times he did this. It was a grueling and exhausting practice, but he said to me, *"I was a 74-year-old man with daddy issues. It was time. It was time."* And his spirit is born anew.

Look. This conversion for him wasn't a coming to Christ for the first time. For some of us, that may be what is needed. For him, it was a transition of spirit. It was a willingness to overcome a barrier, a hang-up, a matter that was hindering his spirit from going to the next level with God, his Creator, and Jesus his savior as he healed over old wounds with this father.

Nicodemus was willing to consider a transition from all he had given his life to, all he'd ever known, to see if God might be challenging his own spirit to connect in a way like never before. If you're wrestling with the need to be born again, born from above, may you have courage enough to dive into that this Lenten season. Your spirit may be ready to transition from the status quo, from the faith-as-usual, to a deeper level of relationship with God, Christ, Spirit. Be courageous. Go for it. Invite a partner to journey into it with you. Growing in Christ may be tiring work, uncomfortable at times, and a willingness to be honest with ourselves in ways we've shut down before. Risk it anyway. Any growth of faith is a transition from who we are now to who we can be yet.

Jesus is worth it. You are worth it. Here's to the transition – may it be born from above.