

**THE TOTAL CHRISTIAN MAKEOVER**  
**2 Lent – Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield – March 20, 2011**  
**The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

**All the readings for this Sunday in Lent tell us that God offers us better terms for life's journey than our own ... and they are God's terms! We are reminded that God is always searching for us, even when we aren't looking for God. We don't come to God first, God finds us first!**

**Today's Gospel talks about Nicodemus. He's a good Episcopalian from our viewpoint. Nic is a leader, he's educated, and he's pious. He is wealthy and has status. Nicodemus' name is Greek, and it means "Conquer." It seems odd that a Jew has a Greek name, but what's interesting is to think what Nic has conquered! It looks like he has conquered the law. So Nic has everything, right? He knew the most, worshipped regularly, gave alms (he tithed!), and had the perfect life. So what's missing? Why does Nic seek out Jesus?**

**The stage is set for us today with the reading in Genesis. Abram and Sari are living a comfortable life ... then God acts ... by calling them. With each encounter with God, we need to recognize that there is a cost and promise. The cost for Abe and Sari is to leave their family and friends, to give up all that is familiar and to leave the known and comfortable. The promise is that their descendants will be as numerous as the stars! The amazing thing is that respond by accepting God's call.**

**It's the same for us when God calls us. Like Abram and Sari, we are challenged to let go of the old and follow where God leaves us. Abram and Sari respond by believing, by trusting. The result is that they are the parents of three great religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam! What might happen if we were to accept God's call? This is the challenge of Lent for us. To accept God's call is to change, risk and embrace new possibilities. What is assured is that God has a plan, God will bless us and that God goes with us on the journey.**

**So let's jump ahead to one of Abram and Sari's descendants. Nicodemus seeks out Jesus. Nic appears three times in the Gospel of John and this is the first time. Have you ever been to a sporting event and see someone show up the sign, "John 3:16"? That's the verse that says God loves so much that God sent Jesus and if we believe in him we'll have eternal life. I wish they would add the ext verse that we hear today, that Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it! The Nicodemus story is that which comes before the familiar verse.**

**Here are two figures, Jesus and Nic. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He trusted in himself. Despite all that he has ... it is not enough. Something is missing. He's doing something over and over again, and it's not yielding the result that is sought. Have you ever seen the movie "Groundhog Day" will Bill Murray? It's the story of a mediocre, self-absorbed small time weatherman who goes to a small town in Pennsylvania to see what prediction for the weather a rodent offers. What happens is that Bill's character keeps waking up to relive the same day over and over.**

**At first Bill's character takes the opportunity to do whatever he desires. Then he realizes that this is not a good place. Doing the same thing day after day is driving him crazy. He's in hell. Bill tries to kill himself, but he reawakens again to the same day. Then he tries to embark on a course of self-improvement to attract a female colleague. Are we caught in doing the same thing over and over? You know what the definition of insanity is don't you? It's doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result!**

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Maybe Nic was tired of the insanity of which he was part. Whatever the reason, he seeks out Jesus. He wants to know who he is. But Jesus doesn't give him the answer he is seeking. Jesus says to Nic that there is a better way. What Nic needs it to be born again, to have a complete makeover! Have you ever seen one of the television shows where people have makeovers done? It's usually some woman who has been singled out by her friends or spouse. She is whisked off and given new clothes, a haircut and make up. She returns and her friends are astounded of the "new" person with tears and ohhs and ahhs! The only problem with this makeover is that it only changes the outside. What about the inside?

Nic misunderstands Jesus. He takes the talk about the makeover literally. I have to go back and have my mother birth me again? Jesus is talking about being transformed, about new life and rebirth that takes place inside! It's a "do over", it's about spirit. Some people in our churches talk about being "born again" and want to know the date, time and place this occurred for us. I have always found this irritating. A number of years ago I responded to these people by saying, Good Friday, 33 AD! What's important to me is the makeover of the spirit and soul that take place.

Nicodemus asks the perfect question for us to struggle with during Lent, "How can these things be?" Just like Nic, it's not about rules, works or some secret teaching. What it is about grace, God's gift, God searching for us and God giving us new life. Nic at first thinks it's about figuring Jesus' program, mastering it and winning. Jesus says it's about the way that God gives us and going where God sends us, with faith.

The story of the life of C. S. Lewis helps me to understand what Jesus is talking about. Lewis wrote the Nardia Chronicles, Mere Christianity, A Sever Mercy, The Screwtape Letters and Surprise by Joy. He wasn't looking for God, but God searched him out and found him. Lewis grew up in Northern Ireland attending the Protestant Church of his grandfather. As an adult, he completely abandoned it and began an atheist. Lewis would go on to become a professor of literature at an Oxford college.

Out of nowhere, Lewis became aware of a vague theism ... God did exist. This moved to orthodox Christianity! That's a big leap! Lewis was surprised b the joy that came from God finding him ... and he gave into God! Where did this new self come for Lewis? It wasn't self-made, or based on intellectual achievement; or by words, or by his earlier life experience. What happens is God found C. S. Lewis. It was a gift! A surprise! It was grace at work.

Out of nowhere, a complete makeover happens. Nicodemus is surprised. He is told a makeover has to happen. Lewis is surprised. He goes through the complete makeover. Will we experience the same thing?

Jesus invites us during Lent to be curious about our life and our relationship with God. We are challenged to rethink our assumptions, to alter our perspectives. We are being offered a complete makeover, not just on the outside, but a complete makeover ... inside! Lent asks us how might our life be different if we open ourselves to be born again. There is a cost ... we will have to let go of something. Life will be altered if we respond to the call. All it takes is to accept the gift, believe and trust God ... and a new life will be ours.

Do we want to be born again?

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