

# Peter Bankson: On Being Born Again

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

*In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour*

Peter Bankson

Sermon: June 15, 2003

## On Being Born Again

### SCRIPTURE

*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?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I*

*have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

John 3:1-17

## **INTRODUCTION**

We had hoped to have Hazem Barakat with us this morning. Hazem is a leader of the Islamic Center of Northern Virginia. Several months ago, Emily Gilbert heard him when he spoke to the residents of Goodwin House and recommended that we invite him to share his experience with us, so we did. I thought our plans were well made, but when I spoke with Hazem earlier this week and he realized that today is Father's Day he said that he had made a commitment to be with his family and would not be able to join us. Although I was disappointed, I think Hazem made the right decision.

When Hazem's commitment to family opened up a last-minute opportunity in our preaching calendar and I looked again at the lessons for this week, I thought about the energy that we all felt last Sunday, and decided that I might take these few minutes to open up some of the fresh images about ministry in daily life that were so lively during our reflection time last Sunday. Then, yesterday several of us went to the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dayspring, which added another rich

dimension.

The Gospel lesson for this week includes the verse that is probably the most memorized of all Bible verses, at least among Protestant Christians: "For God so loved the world..." That was on the top of a little packet of Bible verses that I carried around in my pocket when I was in high school, part of an effort to help me internalize the truth of God's Word by memorizing the words themselves.

It was a good faith effort, all that Scripture memory, and I find with delight that some of those verses are there for me even now when the time is right. Having the words in mind helps give me some place to start understanding my experience from a larger perspective ... and sometimes it offers a starting place to accept the larger mystery that holds those things I cannot understand. However, having something I can count on can easily cut me off from the more painful, riskier and more exciting opportunities about which Jesus is talking.

### **Our future depends on how we remember our past.**

Yesterday evening in the [Wellspring Center](#), Gordon Cosby shared a few reflections about the past, the present and the future of the small community of communities who understand us as being in the "tradition of the Church of the Saviour."

One of his points that caught my interest was the observation that "The shape of our future depends on how we remember our past." He observed that if we remember only the good old days, our time has passed. However, if we remember both the joy and the pain of where we have been, we are much more likely to have an exciting future. The process to encourage this, he

suggested, is something he calls “double remembering,” the process of retelling the stories of where we have fallen short with just as much integrity as the stories of where God has done something wonderful in our midst. Even as we treasure those wonderful memories of the past, we also need to keep in mind all the ways we have fallen short, all those painful examples of our humanity.

This got me back to the Gospel lesson for today. In our lesson, Nicodemus followed the rules, and could not understand the mystery of the Spirit. He asks Jesus – “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born? How can these things be?”

Jesus set him up, but would not force him through the learning process. There is a little earnest appeal to fresh thinking – “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.” Moreover, there is a little cajoling – “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.” Finally, Jesus pushes back forcefully, trying to get Nicodemus into a fresh frame of mind: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may

have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Poor Nicodemus! Stuck in his history.

As we move to Carroll Street, we have an excellent opportunity to remember both the joy and the pain of our life together here, and we have the opportunity to be open to new calls and new forms for living them out. Our future depends on how we remember our past.

## **No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.**

I am often like Nicodemus, following the rules, asking for the logical explanation, wanting to count on some “system” to keep the uncertainty under control. Nevertheless, Jesus calls us out of this “business-as-usual” thinking, and into the mystery. What Jesus told Nicodemus made no more sense to him than it did to me when I picked up my degree in “economics, Politics and Electrical Engineering.” It did not compute. In fact, most of the time, when it is important, God’s call does not compute. It may make good sense, but it still will not compute.

I came to service in the church as a young adult – my college yearbook says I served four years in the Jonathan Edwards Society as an undergraduate, helping to make possible a worship service for about 20 people every Sunday. However, that was different from Celebration Circle! There, I was doing a good turn. Now, [Celebration Circle](#) is part of God’s call on my life, the place of my grounding and my growth. Belonging to Celebration Circle is very different from being in the

Jonathan Edwards Society, different in ways that make sense but do not add up.

There are at least a couple of ways for us to understand what our Call to be Church is about. At the rule-following level, it is about “coming together for weekly worship, rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and dispersing with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.” As I read this, I stand in the sandals of Nicodemus, asking Jesus, how can we, this little, faithful, hard-working, compassionate family of faith, how can Seekers Church be “born again?”

Jesus does not offer much of a recipe: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

God is not willing to be bound by precedent. Moreover, **if** we are to be open to the Holy Spirit, if we are to receive the Good News in a ways that speaks to who we are and when we are alive, why, then, we can expect the unexpected.

**We need to create new wineskins to carry the Good News to this place where God is sending us.**

Last night at Wellspring Gordon surprised a lot of us. When he got around to reflecting on the future he said that one thing he’d come to understand is that “God is in charge of the wine, but we are the stewards of the wineskins, and each generation needs new wineskins appropriate for that era.” He

talked about how the structures that became the mark of the Church of the Saviour, like mission groups for corporate mission, were appropriate 50 years ago. Nevertheless, he said, they may not be appropriate now, when the challenge to commitment and the competition for people's time is so much greater. He reminded us that we can do nothing to improve the wine – God has that under close quality control through the Holy Spirit – but we do have a lot to say about the containers that we make to pass it around.

As we get ready to move to Carroll Street, we have a great opportunity to take a hard, loving look at the structures of Seekers Church, the wineskins of our time. We need to be remembering **both** the wonders of our life here, and the pain that we have inflicted on each other and the parts of Creation that we serve. Moreover, if we want to have an exciting future, we need to be ready to do some creative re-structuring of the wineskins we have been using.

We will be carrying God's good wine – the good news of the risen Christ, the sense of hope and healing, the opportunity for each person to offer what he or she has for the health of God's Creation – into our new home. Knowing that, we need to look at the wineskins we will make to offer the Gospel to others. Moreover, we need to be ready to carry what we know in some fresh ways.

Suppose we decided that each Sunday morning, we would offer an intergenerational learning opportunity based on the weekly lectionary scriptures, open to Seekers of all ages. Would this be a useful new wineskin?

Suppose we started a Saturday gathering for the community – Seekers and other neighbors – once a month to work on something together, a kind of a community service center, a time when we could get to know our neighbors and offer them what we have. Would this be a useful new wineskin?

Suppose we decided to shift our Seekers Overnights at Wellspring into an intergenerational work party to help Dayspring Church with some of the work that needs to be done on the farm. Would this be a useful new wineskin?

Suppose we found a way to identify “personal advocates” (last week I called them personal Paracletes,” which sounded just a bit too cute but I liked the implications.) We could help each other find, claim and celebrate the specific places where God is calling us to serve the people of this city, this Babylon-on-the-Potomac. Would this be a useful new wineskin?

Suppose we found a way to support new mission groups, perhaps focusing on common knowledge rather than a common place of work. We might call forth mission groups for healers, teachers or mentors. Would this be a useful new wineskin?

Yesterday as I sat in the steamy crowd of old friends who had run through the rain to get out of the tent with its metal lightning rod pole and into the Wellspring Center, I felt a deep stirring, a sense that there is something precious in the heritage we share with the rest of the Church of the Saviour. Moreover, the clearest part of that heritage is the Good News that God is doing a new thing.

We, brothers and sisters, have a standing invitation to be part of that New Thing. May we have the courage to say "Yes!"

Amen.

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Where is God calling you to disperse from this place with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which you live your life?

Ask yourself, "How do I receive the Good News? How can I offer that to others? Where do those opportunities for ministry happen for me? How can Seekers stand with me there?"