

LENT TWO, YEAR A, MARCH 5, 2023

We've all heard the expression that life is an adventure. Well, to paraphrase Webster, adventures are unusual, stirring experiences, exciting and even dangerous undertakings. There is an element of risk in setting out on an adventure: there is the unknown, the unexpected and the element of surprise.

Because of the routines we follow, we often forget that life is an ongoing adventure. When we leave our homes we act and believe that we will reach our destinations with no unusual event startling us out of our set expectations. The truth is we know nothing about what will happen. Our cars could break down, there could be construction on the road, or a gaggle of geese strolling across the highway. Anything could happen. Life is pure adventure.

Since life is pure adventure circumstances and events have a way of determining the adventure our lives will take. For instance, I'd like to tell you a story this morning about a man named Charles Kaywork. Charles was born in 1904 in Turkey to Armenian parents. In 1915 when he was 11 there was a Turkish uprising against the Armenians and thousands of Armenians were slaughtered. Charles' whole family was massacred. He was the only one to escape because the bodies of his family hid him. He managed to flee to an island off the coast of Turkey where he found some distant cousins to live with.

When he turned 16 Charles ventured off the island and traveled to France, eventually making his way to Canada and from French Canada down to Indiana. Charles didn't know any English so he got jobs in restaurants as a bus boy and was eventually taken in by a Greek family who taught him the restaurant business. One of Charles' gifts was an affinity for languages and he learned to speak Armenian, Turkish, French, Greek and English.

Charles soon made his way to New Jersey where he met his wife, a fifth generation American, and began his family which included 9 sons and daughters. One of those daughters died at the age of five but the other 8 children filled Charles' and his wife's life with joy. His children would tell stories about always having a member of the extended family living with them. And it wasn't unusual for Charles to bring someone home for dinner especially at Thanksgiving or Christmas just because they looked liked they needed a good meal. Strangers at the dinner table was a given.

Charles was a very humble and quiet man who worked till he was in his 80's and always surrounded himself with family which by then included many grandchildren and great grandchildren. Family gatherings filled his house to capacity. Charles adventure in this life ended at the age of 95. Through it all Charles faith was what kept him going. In one of the rare moments that he spoke about himself, Charles admitted that through all the twists and turns of his life so too had his faith gone through a lot of twisting and turning because of all the questions that his life's adventure had brought him. Charles was one of my parishioners at Trinity Church in Kearny. Ironically, one of his sons was a member of Church of the Saviour in Denville where I also served. In many ways his adventure in life seems extraordinary but Charles journey is no different than many of our journeys.

I tell you Charles story for two reasons. Certainly, in Charles' life adventure there were circumstances that forced him to take certain paths and influenced other paths he chose. The fact that Charles whole family was massacred in 1915 made having a family his top priority. His empathy for people who were lost or at a crossroads was exhibited

by all the people he brought home to live with them or have a good meal. His son Lee and his wife Mary and their three sons continued that tradition and were foster parents to hundreds of children until the day one little girl they fostered became their adopted daughter. Several years later her sister was also adopted by them.

The second reason is because each of us has our own life adventure. Sometimes we look at other people's life stories that absolutely amaze us and we look at our lives and say, "But my life has never had anything dramatic happen that forced me to change the path my life has taken." Certainly, a life threatening illness, the loss of a job or the loss of a parent, sibling or spouse has a way of making us refocus our lives. But the paths our lives take don't necessarily require a dramatic or tragic occurrence. Look at the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Nicodemus this morning. They embarked on a new venture in the latter part of their lives out of curiosity, a burning desire to learn more and a leap of faith. Certainly, positive experiences have a way of also altering our life's adventure.

And that is true about our faith journey as well. Too often we think that our faith is a one shot deal. But just as our life's adventure takes twists and turns so does our faith intertwine with those twists and turns. Faith is an adventure. We are given chances over and over again to renew our faith, to take risks, and to move forward. That is what that often misunderstood phrase to be born again is all about? And what does it mean to be reborn? The Greek word that is used is an interesting word because it can mean 'born anew', 'born again', or 'born from above'. No matter how you put it, it means a dramatic change in your life.

But to be born again doesn't mean we're all of a sudden turned into some kind of super Christian who believes they have all the answers and never has to question their faith again. To be born again is to be given the chance to start fresh into the process of spiritual growth and to renew one's relationship with God. We are "born again" when we put our trust in God instead of our own resources. We are "born again" when we are open to the possibility that the spirit of God can come at any moment. We are born again when we invite Christ to be in our hearts when we think of others; We are born again when we invite Christ to be in our mouths when we speak to others; we are born again when we invite Christ to be in our eyes when we see them, and in our ears as we listen. That's how we're born again.

Jesus reminded Nicodemus that whatever happened to him would be as the wind in his hair or as a soft kiss of air on his cheek. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that when it comes to faith, literal, concrete explanations simply won't do. Faith needs to be experienced. Nicodemus needed to get beyond his intellect; he needed to have a change of heart. He needed to begin to rely on God's grace. And Nicodemus learned what it meant to be born from above. He learned that it is not about carrying a heavy load of guilt around with you, but about unburdening your load and letting God's forgiveness take effect in your life. He learned that life abundant is a gift from above. It isn't something to be earned or achieved. It isn't something that can be claimed or proven. It isn't a reward for being awfully good or studying the scriptures. The Spirit blows where it will in our lives -- it's up to us to notice, to be ready, and to be willing to be changed.

That is what Abraham and Sarah and Nicodemus and Charles all did. They allowed events in their lives to help them explore new adventures in their faith life. They allowed the spirit blowing in their lives to change any preconceived notions they had about

God. Charles used to say in his heavily accented English, "God is mystery, always changing, but God is here", and he would tap his chest. "That's what keeps me going." Abraham, Sarah, Nicodemus, Charles typify this "faith constantly begins" as the essential element of a living relationship with God.

So, in this season of Lent let us take a close, hard look at our adventure through life. As you reflect on your adventure recognize that Jesus calls us over and over again to step out in faith to journey to a new land. He called that land the Kingdom of God which is a place that constantly offers us a place to be born anew. Amen.