Encounter

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
John 3:1-21

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Think for a minute about your encounters with people you met that in some way changed your life or changed your direction or your understanding. My daughter, Shelley, reminded me this week of a time I was driving us through a large city park. Ann Marie, next to me in the front seat, said, “Honey, you might slow down. Police are known to patrol this area pretty heavily.” I replied, “Uh, well, whatever,” and kept on going at the same speed when, at that exact second, red, whirling lights appeared behind me with a bit of a siren. Busted! The policeman came to my car window to discover me handing him my license and registration, a sheepish expression on my face, a quiet woman in the front seat and a laughing girl in the back seat. He returned after awhile to say, “Mr. Ott, I am not going to give you a ticket but you need to stay within the speed limit in the future.” He knew I would pay nothing then but I would hear about it for the next twenty years – and based on Shelley’s joy with the incident, I will. That unexpected meeting was an encounter, an encounter the consequence of which was a 90-degree turn in my behavior. I became the model driver in that city park ever after!

When I was graduate student, I was looking for a K-Mart one Sunday morning, which tells you I wasn’t entirely churched at that moment in my life. I managed to get lost and drove up in front of a Covenant Presbyterian Church at 11:00 a.m. I had attended Presbyterian churches in the past, so I thought to myself, “I think I’ll go!” Jim Tozer, the pastor, had just returned from a conference teaching people to share their faith with others. He said, “I am forming a class to teach people how to talk about Jesus.” So after worship, I walked up to him and said, “Dr. Tozer, you don’t know me but I am a grad student at Purdue and I would like to join your class.” He replied, “I am sorry but the class is already full, but I’ll tell you what, I visit hospitals every Monday afternoon, and if you would like to come with me, I will teach you.” His goal wasn’t to teach me to visit sick people but in his super-busy schedule it was the only time he could practice the “with-me principle” and include me with him. Jim’s zeal, passion and love for Jesus Christ was electric and I found myself transformed by this man, with the resulting 90-degree turn from engineering studies to working for him for fifteen years.

The verb “encounter” means to meet someone, often in an unplanned, unintended and unexpected way. The most significant encounters are transforming moments that change you in ways you cannot imagine or foretell. You aren’t the same anymore. They lead to a 90-degree turn in life, like me encountering a policeman or encountering Jim Tozer. There are countless encounters you and I have with people that shape our lives in a variety of ways. Your life direction changes, the people you associate
with changes, behaviors that have weighed you down evaporate, new behaviors that breathe vitality into you begin.

The idea of birth is central to our text from scripture this morning. Birth is always about encounter. Birth “from below” - on earth - is all about encounter. Encounter between the parents before the birth then, afterwards, encounter between the baby and the mother and then the father and then many others. Birth “from above” is also about encounter; your encounter with God our Father through your following of the person of Jesus and the changed life it brings.

This morning, we come to one of the most famous encounters in the Bible, indeed in all of literature, the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. 1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 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.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above [also translated ‘born again’].” 4 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?” 5 Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’

Nicodemus just doesn’t get it. 9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Nicodemus was a Pharisee, someone who adhered very closely to the Law, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament. He knew his scriptures and he kept the practices of his faith, but the idea that there is a spiritual rebirth was utterly new to him. It’s not unlike you and me if we are among those who have attended church for years and been involved in various church activities but have never really had a face-to-face encounter with the person of Jesus. If someone were to ask you, “Do you know that you have opened your heart to Jesus Christ and have you chosen to follow him as your Lord?” what would you say? If you are unsure, you share that uncertainty with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was drawn to Jesus. He either heard Jesus teaching directly or he heard about Jesus but he had questions to ask and he had a social standing he wasn’t willing to risk. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, which was something like our Supreme Court, with all of the
respect and attention that being a member of such a court would bring you. He was also wealthy. So he comes to Jesus at night. We don’t know if Jesus was alone, the Bible doesn’t say, but clearly Nicodemus isn’t ready to put his social standing at risk and he wants a private audience. His encounter with Jesus speaks to his deepest heart and he becomes a follower of Jesus.

We were once a part of a small group Bible study in our church and two of the members were John and Nancy. Nancy was a devout lover of Jesus. John was a full professor, who was brilliant in his field but who knew almost nothing about Jesus. He simply came to the group to be supportive of Nancy. Over a period of months, John began to ask increasingly pointed questions. The one I remember is, “You don’t mean to suggest Jesus Christ is God, do you?” I was proud of the group for the way it only replied to John by saying, “John, you are asking the right questions, great questions. We are praying for you.” One day, John called me and asked for a private conversation. He only had one question for me, “Stan, do you really believe this Jesus stuff? Do you believe he died and rose again? That he is alive now.” I looked him in the eye and replied, “Yes, I do,” and John replied, “Then while I admit to some fear in this, I would like to open my heart to Jesus.” Just as Nicodemus sought a private meeting with Jesus, John, through me, was seeking the same kind of private meeting. He experienced the reality of John 3:16 - *For God so loved the world [loved Nicodemus, loved you] that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* John’s life changed, and now, some thirty years later, you can clearly see the light and joy of Jesus in John’s daily life!

A Jesus encounter will change your life in every way, just as when Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus, his life made the 90-degree turn. Nicodemus appears two more times in scripture. When some Pharisees are upset with Jesus and complain to the Temple police, “Why haven’t you arrested him?” it’s Nicodemus who speaks up and stands up for Jesus. It would be like you speaking up to defend the wonder of the person of Jesus if you get into a conversation with people in our day that have other ideas about him. Nicodemus also appears after the crucifixion of Jesus. He brings along one hundred pounds of expensive spices and, working alongside Joseph of Arimathea, they prepare the body of Jesus for burial. You can see his social standing was no longer of any consequence compared to the joy of encounter with Jesus. The 90-degree turn has changed him. Please note, Nicodemus didn’t turn 90-degrees in his behavior and as a result encounter Jesus. It’s the encounter with Jesus that will change you.
Bruce Larson tells of an English friend by the name of Norman, a devout follower of Jesus, who found himself in Uganda in the middle of a huge Christian revival with thousands coming to follow Jesus.¹ Norman saw, in the vulnerable style of the Ugandan Christians, a great contrast with his own pretensions. One night, after spending time with these people who believed in “walking in the light,” Norman went back to his hut, knelt on his knees and began to confess to God his sins against his wife, who was still in England. In the middle of this confession to God, he suddenly heard the still small voice of God speaking to him, “Norman, don’t tell me. I told you. Go and tell your wife.” A 90-degree turn. A changed life. A changed marriage.

When you have a Jesus Encounter, he changes your life. You will find 90-degree turns in how you relate to friends, how you connect in your marriage and with your children, how you manage your money as you live on it, give it to the church and to others, save it, pay debt and taxes with it. You will find a new hunger within your spirit to get to know this Lord who loves you by reading the Bible, getting in a small group Bible study and opening your heart in prayers. It all begins when you open your life to Jesus. Simply pray to Jesus the words of Psalm 27:8: “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek.

In his book, Habitation of Dragons, Keith Miller recounts a speaking trip in which things did not seem to go well. “I left my home state to address a large group of business people concerning Christ’s power to change human lives but my talk felt flat to me. I found myself wrapping up my remarks by saying something I’d never said before: ‘You know, I have the strangest feeling that I came all this way to talk to one of you who may be going through some of the same feelings of frustration and self-pity I am. And, if you think you are the person, I would like to meet you after this session.’ I sat down feeling completely stupid.”

Keith said he was thinking, “These people are going to think I’m some kind of kook, but it was too late to change my remarks and I forgot all about it.” Then at the end of a line of well-wishers he saw a short, heavy-set man with glasses and black wavy hair. His name was Joe. A couple of tears had started down his cheeks. Keith said, “I took Joe aside and we began to talk. ‘I’m an attorney and I travel a lot,’ Joe began. ‘I never planned to come to this meeting. As a matter of fact, I have a mistress in this town and was coming to see her – although I was supposedly on a business trip.’ For weeks I have been feeling very guilty. I wanted out of this relationship, but couldn’t seem to break it off. Well, anyway, when I got out of my car a block from this church in front of her apartment, who

should come charging up to clap me on the back but three guys from my home church. I almost fainted as one of them asked, ‘What are you doing here, Joe?’ ‘I, uh…I’m just passing through.’ I lied, scared to death they would to see the guilt written all over me.

“Hey, great. We’re just going down to hear some Christian businessman speak. You’ve gotta come with us.’ Joe said, ‘I was afraid to say no for fear I’d somehow given myself away. But as I sat there in the meeting and heard you speak about a new start in life – a life with purpose and meaning, I was amazed….Then you stood up there and looked squarely at me and said what you did, and I knew that I was the one.”

Keith Miller was in a rush to catch a plane. “Listen,” he said, “we haven’t much time. Would you like to commit your whole future to Jesus, including your relationship with this woman? Joe bit his lip and said, “Boy, I sure would.” Miller invited Joe to confess that he wanted his way more than God’s way. He led him in a simple prayer in which Joe asked Christ for the power to begin living only for Jesus.”

Keith and Joe promised to pray for each other and to stay in touch. Miller glanced at his watch and noticed that the whole conversation had lasted about twelve minutes. Joe did stay in touch. He wrote to Keith and told him that his new life in Christ was both exciting and difficult. He ended the relationship with his mistress. He began to dig into the Bible on his own. About a year later, he wrote to ask if Keith would come to his town. As Keith remembers it: “He had told a few people about what was happening to him, but he did not feel they understood him….Several people in town had come right out and asked what had happened in his life.” So Keith Miller flew to Joe’s town and traveled with him to the church where Joe’s curious friends had gathered for the evening. Keith says he will never forget walking into that room and looking into the faces of more than 800 people…and of whom wanted to know why Joe’s life was different. That’s a 90-degree turn. That’s what a Jesus encounter can mean. It all starts with a heart that is open to him, open to being born from above, open to a transforming moment that will last for the rest of your life.

If such an encounter appeals to you, I invite you to open your heart to Jesus and to pray with me – words you will find on the screen:

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor, from this moment forward, to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become.
Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer with me I assure you, our Lord Jesus lives within you and wants you to grow to know him. I invite you to speak to me or those who are forward for prayer and we will connect you with opportunities to feed your soul.

To continue your growth, please look into the information on Worship +2 in your bulletin or on our website and choose a growth opportunity – and go!