

Recovery Sunday

Like every Sunday, today is a celebration of resurrection and rebirth. The ordinariness of this ritual leads me to the temptation of complacency, and so I am grateful when we have readings like today, that are a series of dramatic reminders of the incredible gifts that God has promised to His people. They are also a reminder that wealth, power, and status can be a barrier to accepting this freely offered gift of love.

My name is Esther, and I'm an alcoholic. Some people prefer that one say "a recovered alcoholic," but the truth is that my disease is in remission, even though it's called recovery.

What difference does it make?

My life today is good—but forgetting where I came from is like forgetting that every breath we breathe is a gift from the God who is Life.

Today's readings are about basing our lives on the promise of God, believing that resurrection and rebirth are possible.

We start with Abram, an aging Middle Eastern guy whose wife is "barren." Those familiar with the culture of the Middle East in that time know that death was an accepted fact: the average time of death in Abram's time was probably little more than 30 years, and maturity was characterized by a variety of ailments including blindness, leprosy, and plagues of various sorts. When life was over, it was over! The only hope of your name lasting even a generation beyond your death was to have children who would remember you.

Your identity came from your clan, and it was only kinship that offered any safety. So when God told Abram to leave his home and his clan, and head out to a destination that he didn't know, he was literally leaving his life behind.

The commandment of God was simply impossible! How is an old man, already 75 years old, going to become the father of a nation by giving up his identity and all his security, based on a promise from God?

Of course we know that Sarai did become pregnant in her old age, but in order for this to happen they had to be reborn, with new identities: Abram became Abraham, and Sarai, Sarah.

Paul tells us in our reading from Romans that it was Abraham's willingness to believe the promise and act on it that made him a righteous man. In this context, righteous doesn't mean morally pure—it means living in the right relationship with God. Or as our rector often puts it: Remember who you are and whose you are!

Then we have Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin and a leader in Israel, who sneaks out at night so the neighbors won't know that he's actually seeking an answer from Jesus. Nicodemus has a lot to lose: he's no doubt well-to-do, if not rich, and he has position and the power that comes with it. We can imagine the meeting between the ragged preacher Jesus and the richly garbed politician that took place late that night. Nicodemus is curious and a little suspicious—what does this Jesus guy have that makes people so willing to follow him? He tries a little flattery: "we know you are a teacher sent from

God.” But Jesus doesn’t fall for it; instead he says “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Poor Nicodemus is totally lost! The idea is absurd—“How can anyone be born after growing old?” Even after Jesus unpacks the metaphor, Nicodemus is still lost. He has not understood the story of Abram, born again as Abraham after he believed and acted upon the promise of God. Jesus rubs it in: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

What Jesus is saying has no meaning for those who are comfortable: they don’t need rebirth—they’ve already got the goodies in life. The only thing that worship does for them is to justify their possession of what they already have—especially when confronted by those who have nothing!

So is God asking us to give up status, power, and security based on the promise of some wandering preacher?

If that is so, then no wonder Nicodemus cries “who then can be saved?”

Thirty-eight years ago I was one of those who had nothing. Like Nicodemus, I looked pretty good on the outside. I had a good job, a handsome British husband, and three wonderful sons. No one outside of my family and a few wise ones at my church had any idea that I was an alcoholic. I never had a DUI, I attended church every Sunday, and I served as a counselor to young people who were in trouble with the Juvenile Court.

But year by year, and drink by drink, the person who was Esther was dying, both physically and spiritually. My children lost a mother—I was incapable of seeing beyond my own desires; my husband lost my companionship; and my ability to think clearly dissolved in a puddle of rationalizations and excuses.

When the message of salvation came to me from an overweight colleague who was half my age, I thought the idea of giving up alcohol was ridiculous, especially coming from her!

How would I cope with those juvenile delinquents I supervised without the relief of a glass of wine after work? Worse still, if I followed her suggestion and went to AA, everyone would know that I had a drinking problem! I would be shamed!

But the awareness that one’s life is progressively being destroyed can be a powerful incentive to try something different. That’s why it is always the poor, the sinners, and the poor in spirit that respond to the message of Jesus with such enthusiasm.

In 1976, I was terrified. To set out on the journey to sobriety is to embark on a journey into the unknown—what will happen to me? Will I become a bluenose like Carrie Nation and take a sledge hammer to bars and taverns?

Will my friends still want to be with me?

Will I become some kind of religious fanatic?

Go to AA? I went there once and those people were a real mess! I’m not like them!

Thus began for me the journey into resurrection and joy. But as the poster on my office wall put it, “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable!”

I changed my job, my marriage, my sexual orientation, and my friends over the course of the next two years. In fact, I changed so much that I no longer knew the woman I once was, and only in my retirement have I come to have compassion for her as the impoverished soul that she was, and to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in her. As Paul observes, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

When we talk about addiction, however, it’s important to remember that chemical addiction is a disease, not a sin. Further, it is a brain disease that tells the addict that there is nothing wrong—the chemical is the solution, not the problem. The medical community knows how to treat the disease, but first the addict has to admit having the problem. And that is a spiritual issue.

The voice in my head said:

“The problem is all those stresses out there, and people like that colleague who think they are so much better than everybody else. Don’t tell me to go to AA—that’s for losers.”

What made me respond to the message? I have no idea. But the fact that I was pretty sure I was losing my mind may have had something to do with it. And I’m pretty sure that the hand of God was in there somewhere!

It’s important to remember that for every alcoholic like me, there are four of you out there whose lives will be affected as my family was. Without help, the behaviors learned in the family’s effort to cope with addiction may remain for life. Many of us have heard about someone who didn’t drink themselves, but married three alcoholics in succession, or the child of an alcoholic who grows up to be a compulsive gambler or a workaholic.

To be born from above, for a family, may not require a religious conversion—it might just involve going to Alanon!

The first three of the 12 steps of AA and Alanon are called the belief steps:

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol or drugs.
2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We turned our lives and our will over to the care of God as we understood God.

Or the short version: I can’t, God can, and I think I’ll let him.

My life since that moment of recovery has been beyond anything that I could ever have imagined. When my eyes were finally opened, I found the footprints of God everywhere—even through the bad times.

The twelve step programs grew out of the Christian tradition and are grounded in the recognition that what God wants for His people is the good life. We know that He sent Jesus to show us how to do that and it cost Him--His life. Is that what He expects of us?

The closing sentences of the Fifth Step cry out, "What an order! I can't go through with it!" The response to us and to the followers of the Twelve Step programs is the same: "Do not be discouraged—no one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles.----- The point is that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines."

Today and every Sunday we have the Eucharist to nourish us as we seek to grow into the nation of believers who trust God's promise, and base our lives upon it. Please join me at the table as we celebrate our acceptance of the miracle of rebirth.

Amen