

East Liberty Presbyterian Church
The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
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“Restating the Obvious”
John 3:1-12

It is harder to be a preacher now than it was ten years ago. The ubiquity of the Internet, Facebook, smart phones, and 24-hour-a-day news coverage means that people are inundated with words all the time. Saying something from the pulpit is harder when people's attention spans are used to Twitter-length comments and 10-second Headline News stories. It's much harder now to say something of substance about war and peace, racism and social injustice (biblical themes all), without sounding like someone on talk radio – and thereby risk people getting upset because “the preacher's talking politics again.” I've never lost too much sleep over that criticism. To preach about hope does not make someone a blind Obama supporter, and to say, “Blessed are the peacemakers” and we need to get out of Iraq and Afghanistan, does not automatically make a minister unpatriotic and unwilling to support our troops. Like it or not, the bible is fundamentally biased and one-sided: it is biased toward the poor, the marginalized, wounded, and vulnerable. To take the bible seriously and put our faith into practice means we will always talk about politics, economics, and what it means to live together as neighbors in Pittsburgh and as global neighbors.

The truth is, although there are 66 books in the bible and thousands of verses to choose from, ministers routinely struggle with finding something fresh to preach about. Over and over again, we talk about love, faith, and justice; how we're supposed to avoid sin and say, “I'm sorry” to God and one another. We find creative ways to present these topics. We tell jokes and personal anecdotes; we quote famous people. But basically our sermons circle around the same set of subjects: life and death, morals and ethics, resurrection and hope, and love. That's why in this busy, crazy world, much of my work as a preacher is just restating the obvious.

Why do preachers need to restate the obvious? Because for every sermon preached (and honestly my sermons are preached as much for me as they are for you), there are hundreds of creative ways NOT to hear its obvious message. Thou shalt not kill: Yes, that's good advice, except of course in cases of war, or capital punishment, or a host of other exceptions to that commandment. Thou shalt not steal: don't steal my stuff, yes, that's a good one; thou shalt not lie – well, we all lie in little and big ways every day and not just at tax time or in political campaign commercials. There is something in us that wants to be the exception to the rule – or better yet, to write the rules ourselves. And it's not because we're really bad or dishonest or deceitful. It's because we're busy. We're dealing with information overload and juggling a thousand details every day. We're trying to care for ourselves and our families in a culture where the sky is the limit for success but there is no true bottom to catch us if we fail. Faith is a priority, but so is paying the gas bill, hoping we have medical insurance, worrying about random acts of violence, and just getting ourselves, our family and kids, through another day.

In that way, we're similar to Nicodemus. He's a busy member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council. He's heard about Jesus but is uncomfortable to be seen with this uneducated rabbi from the backwaters of Galilee. So he sneaks out at night to meet Jesus for himself. And he's told, "No one can see the kingdom of God, can fully understand God's present and future plans, without being born anew, from above." Suddenly like a petulant ten-year-old, Nicodemus argues with Jesus, "How can this be?" He goes all literal on Jesus: "Can we enter our mother's womb a second time?", knowing full well Jesus is speaking about something bigger than literal reality. He gets flustered when Jesus talks about flesh and spirit, the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of heaven; and a second time he says, "How can this be?"

Martin Luther King preached on this passage. In his book, [Where Do We Go From Here?](#), King stressed that the point Jesus was making wasn't a literal one about reentering birth canals, or a spiritual revival one about being born again. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that the structure of his entire worldview needed to be transformed, changed, as if he started over from birth again. He was being called to a new beginning – one shaped from above, by God's Holy Spirit. A new birth able to see the life, death and resurrection of Christ as the centerpiece of all history; that believes the first will be last and lives out that ethic; that knows deep down there is a fundamental difference between the ways of the world and the ways of heaven.

Nicodemus couldn't grasp this. Perplexed, Jesus said in effect, "Truly I tell you about what I know and see; I restate the obvious and tell you about the things before your very eyes, but you do not receive my testimony. I talk about earthly things and you don't believe me, so how can you believe me when I tell you about heavenly things?" Jesus spoke about earthly things – like the Ten Commandments – "thou shalt not kill, no exceptions"; like the Sermon on the Mount – don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth, for you cannot serve God and wealth. Earthly, political things like calling Herod a fox and calling flawed church leaders whitewashed mausoleums. Earthly things like telling his own followers on the night of his arrest to put away their weapons for all who take the sword will perish by the sword (Mt 26:52). Earthly things like washing his disciples' feet as an example of selfless service.

Churches following Jesus the Christ will always talk about earthly things first. We are to state and restate the obvious, hoping all of us will hear the good news instead of answering like Nicodemus, "How can this be so?" We too are to tell people to put away the sword, whether that involves capital punishment or unjust wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are called to forgive and follow restorative justice, instead of believing that punishment and prisons are the ways a civilized nation deals with poverty, mental illness, and drug addiction. We are to tell one another to love neighbors as ourselves, instead of allowing a literal economic underclass to be created and forcibly maintained in this nation of prosperity. Yes, the Federal deficit and our state deficit are critical problems, but resolving these crises should not make the vulnerable in our midst even more at risk. And as has become vividly obvious to all of us this past week, given the events in Arizona, we must clearly say that the rhetoric of violence is immoral and unfaithful. The incendiary rhetoric offered on the airwaves and Internet is dangerous to

all, racist toward many, and will provoke acts of violence by the mentally-unbalanced few. It is morally reprehensible to use sniper rifle targets on websites to identify those you do not agree with. It is morally repugnant to suggest that “Second Amendment solutions” be used to eliminate those you don’t like. Yes, both the right and the left have used extreme language, but frankly, only one side has regularly used violent and dangerous language – and it needs to be named and challenged, no matter how many people support such views or watch their purveyors on cable TV.

Jesus went on from this conversation with Nicodemus to the famous verses of John 3:16 and 17: to talk about how God so loved the world that God sent the only begotten Son, so all who trust him might not die but have eternal life – a Son sent not to condemn the world but to rescue and redeem the world. That mini-sermon is the ultimate example of talking about earthly things so that we can understand heavenly things. Jesus is talking about the incarnation, the becoming flesh of God’s word and will, so that we people of mortal dust might be called children of eternal life. It’s the classic example of restating the obvious: God coming to us changes everything. Challenges everything. All our worldly priorities and patterns of war, violence, fear, envy and doubt are turned on their heads. With God it’s like starting over again, like being born a second time. It’s so obvious and yet it needs to be said and claimed on a daily basis.

Now, at the risk of squeezing too much into this sermon, let me close with a few quick restatements of the obvious. In a world of injustice, be born again this day. When you help others, don’t base your acts of charity on your own needs, your own schedules, or your own demands for how someone should live a virtuous life. Remember we follow Christ the footwasher, the savior and servant of all.

In a world of patriarchy and sexism, be born again this day. Don’t hold onto power as something to be grasped, but listen first – men to women, healthy to the ailing, citizens to the immigrant. And especially to what the young people are saying – and then share power, for we will only see the future if we seek it together.

In a world of racism and distrust, be born again this day. It takes so little to reach out across ethnic lines. 90% of interfaith, interracial, ecumenical ministry is just showing up. Learn one another’s stories. Find some way to cross the color lines each day.

And lastly, in a world of violent acts and violent words, be born again this day. Put away the sword. Practice nonviolence in every aspect of your life. It is a message not just for Martin Luther King holiday weekends. It’s the message of the cross and the empty tomb. It’s the only way to live, literally. It’s so obvious. So for that, may our response always be: Here I am, Lord. Thanks be to God.

AMEN