



Nicodemus (top) in *The Deposition*
by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Every once in a while we all need a hand on our shoulder. Isaiah was working at a time of tremendous chaos. The dreaded Assyrian Empire is knocking at the door of Jerusalem. A 16-year reign of the wicked King Ahaz has rendered worship in the temple nothing more than blasphemy to a pagan God (2Ki.16). And into the middle of this kind of tumult, Isaiah is called to minister. Can you imagine what he must have been thinking?

So, God drops by. He visits Isaiah with a confirmation that The Lord's in control. That's really what we all need from time to time-the assurance that we're on the right track. Some sort of unquestionable sign that God is God, and He's got our back. The imagery here is intriguing. Isaiah is prostrate before the throne of God. He realizes the vast gulf that separates him from the Almighty. He's actually pretty desperate, about as low as you can get. You might even say he's in fear for his life, being in such awesome company. And boy is he afraid of saying the wrong thing; afraid of putting his foot in his mouth yet again.

Been there, done that! I bet you have too. But then, in Isaiah's vision this astounding thing happens. An emissary from God, one of the Seraphs (the name comes from the Hebrew verb

for "to burn") comes to cleanse Isaiah from guilt and sin. This mighty angel carries a burning coal to Isaiah and purifies the prophet's lips - and presumably his language as well. Now, this is another part of the account in Isaiah 6 with which I can truly identify with (story about the Octagon Soap – knowing what was coming wasn't pleasant)

And can you imagine what Isaiah must have been thinking? "Lord, this burning coal held against my mouth, well it's going to hurt! Are you sure you have to do this, Father? Can't I skip this bit of the story and get on with the happy-ever-after part?"

But God says, "Who am I going to send? Who is willing to wade into this mess for me? Who will go for us to our people to encourage them, and redirect them, and remind them, and listen to them, and cry with them, and mourn with them, and suffer with them, and rejoice with them?" And so, trembling with a mixture of fear and excitement, your hand apparently disconnected from bodily motor control seems to raise itself.

And there you are, volunteering for the mission, knowing that you're getting ready to step off the cliff of the familiar into a dimension of the totally unknown. Can you imagine how Isaiah must have felt? Because I can. Feeling more than just a little crazy, more than a bit out of my mind, yet deliriously crazed with emotion, there I go ready to shout out, "Here I am, Father, send me!"

There's some crazy stuff going on in the Gospel too. When we get to this morning's passage of John Chapter 3, we bring out the big guns of New Testament scripture verses. Here at the end of this passage, we have what is almost certainly the most well-known verse in the New Testament -John 3:16, "For God so loved the world..." and you can probably recite the rest, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him should not die but have eternal life."

The other really critical concept that this passage from John Chapter 3 gives us is this truth that we need to be "born again," or "born from above," or in still other translations "born anew." This is what we are told must happen in order to enter the Kingdom of God. That's what Jesus tells Nicodemus in verse 3, and Christ reinforces this same idea in verse 5. What does it mean to be "born again?" It's a phrase that has taken on vast importance for the evangelical Christian world in the 21st century. Many people will actually describe themselves as "born again Christians."

Now, I think after a while as a Christian I'm beginning to understand a little of what these Scripture verses of John Chapter 3 actually mean. But can you imagine what Nicodemus must have thought? Here was this ruler of Jerusalem, steeped in the Jewish religion, this Nicodemus who finds himself one night wandering off to talk with this wacko from Nazareth. He probably doesn't even completely understand his own actions; his feet seem to wander of their own accord to Jesus's front door that night. But Nicodemus has started to question a few things in his life, and he's hungry, starving for answers to the really big questions -you know the ones I mean: "Are you really there, God? Do you truly love me?" So Nicodemus wanders off to Jesus's house, maybe just because he can't sleep and he has nothing better to do!

And Jesus tells this Pharisees who is marinated in the traditions of Jewish legalism, "Nicodemus, there is no condemnation! Because God didn't send me to condemn you by the Law, Nicodemus. He sent me to give your life. That's why I'm here, Nicodemus so that you can be born anew- so that you can have a new, abundant, fabulously wonderful kind of life, and so that you can have that life forever." I mean, this is crazy talk! Can you imagine how Nicodemus must have felt? I can.

Sometimes a person will speak about the importance of having a **personal relationship** with Jesus in order to be "born again." And that's important. But there is something that concerns me here. Is this personal relationship just warm and fuzzy, or does it go deeper? There is wonderful peace and joy that comes from being in the company of the Lord through the presence of the Holy Spirit, a kind of Spiritual high. But is that all there is to having a personal relationship with Jesus? I mean, if you love someone in this world - I mean if you **really** love somebody enough to make them the most important person in your world -then surely that means more than sharing with them just the warm and fuzzy bits of this life. Don't you also share with this person you love so deeply the heartaches of this life? And don't you work with her daily, don't you labor with this person you love so that your relationship grows each year into something fuller, and more complete? Do you love enough to actually accept the fact that, just like Isaiah and his coal, you're going to be burned from time to time? Do you love enough to put yourself, like Nicodemus to the test - do you love enough to put all your dearly held preconceptions about what you think is important or right for your life on the altar of your love? Do you have the courage to go and knock on Jesus's door, even if that means letting go of some feelings and relationships which keep you from being all the person that God wants you to be? Even if it means doing something that seems crazy, from time to time?

If to be born in Christ means to have changed the direction of your life, then another qualification for this Spiritual rebirth is that something else in your life has died. There has to be some room made, you see. Christ was serious when he said you can't serve more than one master (See Mt.6:24). If Christ is truly Lord of your life, there isn't any wiggle-room for other idols to worship.

Part of this being born anew from above means offering up yourself - emptying of the self to make room for the new Adam. Early Christians called this Kenosis, the Greek word for emptying. Surely those who we honor this day who have served our country know something of this offering of the self. Perhaps this "Kenosis" is part of what Paul is talking about this morning in Romans 8 when he writes about the need to "put to death the misdeeds of the body" (See Rom8:13). We need to jettison the crutches of this life that cripple our walk, drag us down, and diminish the blessing that God has given us in our lives.

If you run into someone who has had the Lord come into their lives lately, you'll notice things about the person that have changed. Their speech may well have moderated, and they will probably be using different words to describe the important things in their life. This kind of change is not unusual in the converted because their perspective about life, what they now consider to be important in the world has shifted, and usually has shifted pretty radically. Their spiritual gaze has lifted, you see. Now they are focused heavenward. Indeed, the vision of the redeemed may well have risen to such an extent that they cannot even recognize some of the baser things of this world as being remotely attractive anymore. Because they have been reborn from above.

It's all insane, you know, this wandering off the comfortable, safe beaten track to pursue the mystery of a bush in the wilderness burning with God-fire. To take our faith in our hearts and stride out into the darkness of this world in order to come to the Lord with questions about heavenly places. It doesn't make any earthly sense to abandon those comfortable, familiar habits and addictive routines of this life, to jettison all of that and embrace instead a faith that will constantly challenge us to change and even suffer for The lord. It's all insane when you come right down to it, this Gospel of Jesus Christ. But, you see, we've tried the things born of the sanity in this world - we've tried those remedies for centuries, we've tried all that in our futile attempt to save us from ourselves. But it hasn't worked. In fact, the only thing that can truly save us, the one thing that does work is something that doesn't play by this world's rules. The only thing that can really save you and me in the end is the glorious, wondrous, victorious insanity of the Gospel. And **that** is what it means to be born again.

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