



"WHEN NEW LIFE COMES"

A Sermon by

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What does one do when new life suddenly floods into his existence, when a fresh insight comes and gives one a different perspective on things, or when you begin to experience on the feeling level something you had previously only known intellectually? This is a very relevant question, for such moments of revitalization do occur from time to time. I have found it to be true that the gift of life is not just given to us once — it is given again and again and again in a variety of ways. Last weekend we heard several people describe how this had happened to them in their relation to God, and as a result many of us felt new influxes of spiritual vitality. Therefore, the question is pertinent: how are we to understand such upsurges of vitality and what can we do to participate in them most meaningfully?

I believe we can find some tangible help in this area if we will examine carefully the episode that I just read to you from John's Gospel. Here is a very dramatic example of new life being given to a man.

Jesus' friend Lazarus had been dead for four days before He arrived on the scene. Back in the first century they did not have the sensitive medical instruments that we have today, and sometimes people were pronounced dead when in fact they were only in a deep coma. However this was not the situation in Lazarus' case. He was really and truly dead. In fact, when Jesus asked where they had laid him and called for the stone of the tomb to be rolled back, Martha thought Jesus wanted a last look at his friend and cautioned Him against it. "He has already begun to decompose," she said. "The odor would be terrible. I wouldn't advise you to do it." Here was a situation of deadness in its most extreme form, yet when Jesus called: "Lazarus, come forth," lo and behold, *the dead man came staggering out of the grave!* The gift of life was given to him all over again. Now before we say that this kind of thing is utterly impossible, we need to remember that what seems to us miraculous may simply be the foreshortening of processes that happen about us every day. The line between the miraculous and the normal is not as absolute as you might think. C. S. Lewis once observed that water is being turned into wine all the time. The rain comes down, the grape seeds grow, and finally wine is produced. What Jesus did at the wedding feast in Cana was simply to swiften a process that is occurring all along, and I would like to suggest that the same holds true for the raising of Lazarus. What happened to him in this moment is similar to what happened to him when he was born, when he was given life for the first time. And it is also akin to the daily miracle of waking up each morning. We have become accustomed to that, but it really represents the triumph of being over non-being all over again as consciousness and vitality are given back to us one more time. The truth of the matter is that giving and regiving life is the way the God of the Bible operates. Saint Paul once described Him as the One who can "make the things that are out of the things that are not" and as the One who can "make dead things come to life again." This is the way God works, and we must learn to expect such experiences and be open to "a thousand deaths and resurrections." This is the pattern in our marriages, in our careers, in our religious life — everywhere. Life is not one steady unbroken line of identical experiences. It is "a roller coaster" really — spurts of new life and then periods of decline, only to be surprised again by joy at a new burst of vitality. In my experience, this is how life happens day by

day. In a real sense, we are all named "Lazarus," for again and again we experience deadness only to be called out of the tomb in fresh renewal. But how are we to handle such experiences? There are two things I want to emphasize particularly at this time when new life has come to many.

First of all, we must not expect too much or assume that everything has changed just because something very significant has been altered. Under the impact of new insight or a new revitalization, at first everything has a way of looking differently, but the truth is, what you have are new resources to bring to bear on old challenges. Even Lazarus was not given "a new heaven and a new earth" when new life came to him. He came walking out of that tomb in the same grave clothes he had worn before; that is, carrying the past with him, and he returned to the same circumstances in Bethany he had left four days before. Make no mistake about it, Lazarus was different. He had tasted for himself the joy that lies ahead in Next Adventure, and once and for all he had lost his fear of death. Eugene O'Neil once wrote a play about what Lazarus was like after this experience. He said that his house became known far and wide as the House of Laughter, for there was a joy and a freedom and a merriment about Lazarus that he never lost. However, as powerful as this new perspective was, he still had to bring it to bear on the same marriage, the same job, and the same community he had left. He had a new tool to work with in changing his circumstance, not new circumstances themselves that demanded no challenge.

The point I am trying to make is that the gift of new life — even if it be radical conversion — does not come to us as a finished process where all the old difficulties and problems suddenly evaporate into thin air. New life always occurs in continuity with both the past and the future. For this reason, old habits and old scars do not suddenly cease to exist, but what happens is that we have new resources with which to meet them and thus overcome them. Something different has come into our lives, but it is a tool to effect change rather than a miraculous change of circumstance that leaves us no challenge at all.

I had an experience of this very thing just a few weeks ago when I was on the study seminar to Germany. One night as the program we observed a

Yokefellow sharing group in operation. One of the women began to complain bitterly about what her father had done to her when she was a child and how that she had been an emotional cripple ever since because of his mishandling of their relationship. When she had finished, Dr. Cecil Osborne, the leader, said very quietly: "Have you ever wondered how your father got to be the way he was? What did his parents do to him and their parents do to them and on and on all the way back? The truth is that everyone who wounds us has been wounded himself. This is what the Bible is talking about when it speaks of the sins of the father being visited on the third and the fourth generations. We are all what we are because of our hurts, and when you realize that the whole stream of humanity has been poisoned by imperfections, then you stop pointing exclusively at just one person. There is therefore now no condemnation once you realize that the wounders have themselves been wounded. It frees one to get on with the business of healing wounds and not inflicted on future generations." As I heard these words a whole new perspective flashed before me. You see, there have been several people in my past who have wounded me by what they have done, and I had reacted as if all evil had originated with them and they were totally to blame for the harm they had caused me. For some reason I had never asked how they had gotten that way or what kinds of hurts they had experienced that made them what they were. All of a sudden a whole new way of regarding human imperfection opened up for me, and it was as if a logjam of bitterness which had been accumulating for decades finally got unclogged. I began to see people who I had resented for years in an entirely new light. The old adage "to know all is to forgive all" began to make sense, and that night new life flooded into my experience after decades of blaming and accusing. However, the very next day a circumstance occurred that triggered my old pattern of resentment, and what I had to do was to bring this new resource of insight to bear on that old habit of accusing. What I am saying is that my experience of new life did not eliminate the landscape of my being. I was still John Claypool, with my particular past and my given set of habits, and the new life I had received was simply a tool which enabled me to deal more creatively with the "same old stuff."

My concern here is to protect you from over expecting and thus being disillusioned. When we are

changed by the coming of new life, it is never a total change. We are given new resources to cope with old challenges. Therefore, do not be surprised if old habits recur and old battles have to be fought all over again. Even Lazarus did not spring from the grave into a new heaven and new earth. He was given a fresh resource to bring to bear to Bethany as it had always been and this is the truth about the new life we have received. Be grateful for it and revel in the newness it brings, but do not expect to be delivered out of struggle. Your adventure of becoming now moves to a higher plane that is at once both better and better and harder and harder.

The other thing I want to say about the coming of new life is that we need others to keep the experience alive and growing. Bruce Larson makes the very insightful comment about this scripture that while it was Christ alone who had the power to call Lazarus back to life, it was a small group of neighbors who were asked to help finish the task — to untie him from his grave clothes and set him free. In other words, the mysterious process that originates in God alone needs human collaboration to be completed. Just as the life of a new born baby comes straight from God but must be nurtured by parents in order to survive, so the new spurts of growth we experience require the companionship of others if they are going to grow.

Some form of community has always been an essential part of the Christian religion. When Jesus came to lift the world to wholeness, the first thing He did was create a small group in which the disciples learned how to untie each other and set each other free. Why did He do this? For the simple reason that “a man by himself is only half a man.” Without a relationship to others, I cannot know myself fully or move on in my becoming. It is a physical fact that no man can see all of himself all by himself. I am so put together physically that I cannot see my face or much of my backside without the help of an outside reflector. If left to myself, I can only see a limited part of my own body, and what is true physically is also true spiritually. I cannot begin to know or to see all of myself without the help of loving reflectors — people who dare to get close enough to enable me to discover myself through them. This is “the two or three together” that Jesus felt so important, and this is why we are inviting as many of you as will to be-

come a part of a small spiritual growth group. Here, on a small enough scale so there can be "face-to-face-ness" it will be possible to do two things: you can discover more about yourself — your gifts and strengths — and also in loving kindness you can do for others what Lazarus' friends did for him — untie and liberate each other. If one does not have such redemptive companionship in one form or another, the chances of growing spiritually are small, no matter how intense the influx of new life may have been.

G. L. Stevenson, a Scottish pastor, tells of the time when things began to disappear in his community and a tenant farmer was finally caught and convicted as the one who was doing the stealing. The minister went to see him several times while he was in the penitentiary, and under these circumstances the prisoner came to an honest confession of his sin and experienced a genuine rebirth of faith in Jesus Christ. When the time of his release came he had the genuine desire to start all over again and become a new man. Mr. Stevenson related this situation to a land owner in the community, and this man agreed to give him another chance. However, before the reformed thief ever got back into the community, a howl of protest went up when it was learned that he was being allowed to come back. Even among church people there was more talk about "the leopard and its spots" than how Christ could help a man become a new creature. And so even though the landowner persisted and the man was brought back, no one except the minister and this man tried to help and gradually the new resolve waned and he lapsed back into his old ways. Stevenson writes that he saw in this process exactly what Jesus meant when he said to the church: "I give to you the keys of the kingdom, and what you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and what you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." In a very real sense the unwillingness of the people in that community to get close to this man and to do for him what the group did for Lazarus served to bind him to his old sins. Where were "the two or three together" to hold forth hope and help him off with his bandages and enable him to get free? Had there been that kind of small group support, Stevenson said, the outcome might have been different.

And right here is where I see one of the crucial ministries of the church. We cannot call people

back to life — only God can do that. But when He does this and they come forth as Lazarus — not completely made whole, but still bound and tied by old scars, we can rally round such ones and participate in their liberation. And there is no better way for this to happen than the structure of the small spiritual growth group where love and insight can be shared. It is to the birth of new life what nurturing parents are to a new born babe. It is the necessary context without which growth is impossible.

Which brings me back to where the sermon began. Life is not just given to us once — it is given over and over again. In our marriages, in our careers, in our religious life, it is not uncommon to experience deadness only to have a spurt of new vitality rush in. And when this happens, as it did to many here last weekend, how are we to react? For one thing, we must not expect too much from it. The coming of new life does not obliterate all that has gone on before. It simply provides fresh resources for old challenges. Lazarus did not come back to “a new heaven and a new earth.” He came back to Bethany and his wife and his sister. He had a new perspective, to be sure, but it was a tool to change circumstances rather than a situation where they were all changed and no challenges remained. And the same thing applies to our situation. Last weekend brought a fresh influx of spiritual oxygen to many, but now we must begin putting it to work on the agenda that remains. All the old habits have not disappeared, but now we can overcome, for new power to cope with old problems has been given.

The other thing is that we must have other people to keep alive what has been given and help that to grow. Lazarus needed someone to untie him and set him free. He needed a small group of fellow strugglers who would take time enough to identify his points of bondage and tenderly remove the bandages. And this, my friends, is what the church is all about day by day. To the degree that we are willing to establish such relationships and assume this kind of contact with each other, we can loose on earth that which will be loosed in heaven. But to the degree that we neglect this redemptive fellowship and refuse to move close to problem people, our actions will serve to bind people to their old ways of bondage everlastingly.

Thanks be to God — new life does come again and again and again. May we learn to live our days and our nights in openness to this possibility, and when it does come into our midst, as it did last week, may we know how to regard it properly and how to keep it alive. This is the challenge before us now. By God's grace, so let it be.

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