

## **“Born From Above”**

**March 16, 2014, Lent 2 Sunday**

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I will begin today’s sermon with a personal witness about how God has acted in my life. I thought I’d begin with the time I decided not to become a Priest. It was the spring of 1966 and I was finishing up my freshman year of high school at Quigley Preparatory Seminary in the Archdioceses of Chicago. I have told you before about my growing up in a devout Roman Catholic family. I went from Catholic Parochial school to Junior Seminary. At Quigley, we had school on Saturday with Thursday off. This was done to keep us teen-age boys, we future Roman Catholic priests, busy on the weekends so we would not start dating.

After one year in Junior Seminary I decided that Roman Catholic priesthood was not for me. And, not just because I had discovered girls, lost some weight, and my complexion was clearing up; I was not that shallow even at fifteen. I think I began to wonder about my dedication to mission and ministry when I was asked to declare a foreign language for my sophomore year. I already was taking Latin which was required all four years in seminary. At Quigley we also had to choose between enrolling for Spanish or French. I was struggling with Latin and thought Spanish would be an easier language to learn along with Latin. However, I signed up for French on the advice of one of my friends who cautioned me. “Don’t take Spanish. When you’re ordained the Bishop will force you to go to some poor Latino community or even a poorer Spanish speaking foreign county. Take French. Chicago does not have any French ghetto neighborhoods.”

You need to understand my frame of mind at fifteen. I was raised in the suburbs. I never went to school with any disadvantaged minorities; I never knew anyone who could be considered disadvantaged. I lived seven blocks from a nice suburban boy’s Catholic high school yet I traveled twenty miles to downtown Chicago by bus and subway, through

some of the worse neighborhoods in that city so that I could go to Seminary. During this time, my best friend was stabbed in the shoulder as the train pulled away from the subway platform. A hand reached through an open window and randomly stabbed my friend. Another classmate was beat up waiting for a bus. A large part of my decision, not the sole criteria, but a large part of my decision not to become a priest was the fear I had that I would be placed in a church and live in a rectory somewhere on the mean streets of Chicago.

I left Quigley after one year and began attending the public high school in my neighborhood. It was a brand new, suburban, “country club” school. After graduation from high school I attended Northern Illinois University in the tranquil cornfields just outside of DeKalb, Illinois. After graduation from college I got married; less than a year after marriage I accepted a job with Firestone as a Manager Trainee at one of their stores. For over two years, I successfully managed the Firestone Auto Center in downtown Gary, Indiana. From 1974-1976, Gary, Indiana was the murder capital of the United States. Gary was a steel town and arguable had some of the meanest of mean streets in the country. God laughed.

I give this little witness so that you might better understand our Lord’s saying to Nicodemus: “What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

At our birth it is impossible to predict how our life will end. We do not know whether an infant will have a long life or a short life. A happy life or a sad life, a life filled with success or filled with rejection,

a life filled with wealth or filled with poverty. It may be that a person will experience rejection and success, wealth and poverty, happiness and sadness in a never ceasing combination and sequence. It is impossible for us to know where we are in our life this minute; the next hour of our life might bring unimagined fortune, unimagined tragedy, or physical life might simple end.

You may be at any time in your life, at the beginning, middle or end, of you current phase of life. In our lives we, in the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." In the History written by Herodotus, there is a story about the rich king who shows off his fabulous wealth to the philosopher. The king then asks the philosopher, who is the most blessed man the philosopher has ever encountered, believing that the philosopher, having seen the king's wealth and splendor, will choose him. The philosopher names a man of wealth and renown as the most blessed. The king objects to the choice made by the philosopher since the man he named is dead. The king asks the philosopher to choose the second most blessed man. The philosopher names another person of fortune and fame. Again, the king objects to the choice since that man is dead, also. The philosopher then explains to the king his choices. He tells the king, "Let no man alive be called blessed, just lucky." Such it is of those born of the flesh.

There is for us hope: to be born anew. To be born anew is not to be born of the flesh; born to be tossed to and fro. To be born from above is to be born of the Spirit. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. To be born from above is not to be tossed around by the wind. To be born from above it is to be the wind, to be one with the wind.

When someone in this congregation leaves us I pray for them and I give them a blessing. The words of the prayer I use includes this, "Since God is everywhere, all places are the same." Those are the words for someone who has been born from above.

When we are born from above we place our faith in God. We hear in today's Old Testament and New Testament readings about the faith of Abraham, the Father of Faith. Abraham at seventy-five years old is told by God to leave the country of his family to go to the land of Canaan. At seventy-five years old, Abraham "believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Abraham's faith made him free to obey. A person of faith is free to do anything God asks because a person of faith believes God only wants what is good for him. God wants you to believe in his only Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

When a child is born of the flesh the only certain prediction that can be made is that the child will die in the flesh. Our physical life is a very uncertain matter other than our death. But, spiritually we can be born from above; to be born from above is to put all of our faith in Jesus Christ. To be born from above is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to be one with Christ, to be one with the person who has overcome the world, the flesh and the devil. With faith in Jesus Christ your new life stays new. Jesus told the woman at the well that he had living water to give "those who drink of the water I give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The good things God wants for you are available to you in the Spiritual Realm. The adversities' of this world, being tossed to and fro, being abused by outrageous fortune, matters little for in the words of the Apostle Paul, "For all things are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's."

When I was 15, I made a decision to take control of my life and not become a priest. You see how well that worked. Sometime later I slowly began to turn over control of my life to Jesus and wonderful things began to happen, freeing things. Your life can begin again, new things can happen whatever your age. Remember, Abraham was seventy-five! It is for all of us a matter of faith and a desire to be free as the wind. Amen.