

“GOD’S GIFTS: IV – AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME”

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-12

John 3:1-17

Like many of you, I love the television show “Jeopardy.” I’ve been watching it for years, and actually, I tape it every night so if I miss it, I can watch it when I get home. Like many of you, I watched with fascination earlier this year the journey of James Holzhauer who wracked up over \$2 million dollars on the show. And like many of you, I’ve kept host Alex Trebek in my prayers as he fights a battle with pancreatic cancer.

Now, having said all that, you probably don’t want to watch Jeopardy with me, because I’m pretty competitive – actually, my family would say really competitive. For years and years, we’ve watched the show together lots of times and we shout out the answers, anxious to prove who’s the smartest in the family. I get yelled at because I shout out the question before Alex even finishes giving the answer – which, of course, is against the rules.

But, I’ll tell you something. If I’m watching Jeopardy with someone else and playing along with them, I cringe if a Bible category comes up. Why? Because the pressure’s on for me to get it right! You can’t imagine the kind of ribbing my brothers give me if I miss a Bible question! I’m supposed to know everything about the Bible, right? I have a reputation to maintain!

Well, the central character in this morning’s Gospel lesson has a reputation to maintain as well. His name is Nicodemus, and in this lesson he comes to visit with Jesus in the dark of night. Now, you need to know more about him. Nicodemus was a religious man, but more than that a learned religious man, a scholar. He was a leader of the Jews, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin (a ruling council.) He was well schooled in the law and the prophets. He knew Biblical history left and right. People came to him for guidance and instruction.

But, though he knew a lot, Nicodemus knew that he needed to know more. There had to be more. Perhaps it was the Spirit who nudged him. And so he went in the darkness of night to talk to Jesus, certainly looking over his shoulders for fear of being seen, for fear of being judged weak, for fear of people making fun of him. It was a risky thing to do, even scary. At his stage in life, Nicodemus could have just stayed the course, done what he’d always done, believed what he’d always

believed, not tried to stretch his understanding or grow in new ways. He could have done any of that, but he didn't.

He could have talked himself into not stepping out and talking to Jesus. After all, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Things were good enough, weren't they?

Well, no they weren't, because something, no someone, the Holy Spirit stirred up in Nicodemus a desire to know more, to take the risk, to risk his reputation, to risk being embarrassed or called out as weak. Nicodemus let the Spirit move him and off he went to Jesus and ended up having a conversation that would change his life forever. Because Jesus spoke to him about being born again, being born from above, and about God who sent His only Son into the world that the world might be saved through him.

Despite all the reasons Nicodemus could have turned away from this opportunity, he didn't. He took the risk, stepped out in faith, put his faith in God and his encounter with Jesus turned out to be absolutely life-changing. As the book of Ecclesiastes says it so beautifully: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

At just the right time, in just the right season of Nicodemus' life, faith came pouring in and he was a new creation.

Oh dear friends, too often we're afraid to take risks, to step out and do something daring or new, to risk our reputation. Too often, we let "common sense" rule the day and convince ourselves that there's nothing new under the sun for us to discover, or it's too late to try. We don't want to be embarrassed or to look foolish if we fail at something we try, so as a result, we don't even try. Sadly, too often we prefer to play it safe, maintain the status quo, stay as we are and not stretch our wings.

Questions stop us. What will people think? What if I'm too old to learn something new? What if I fail? What if I look foolish?

Oh, but look at the Biblical witness which is filled with people breaking out of their well-established molds and letting the Spirit lead them in new ways to do new things with their lives.

Look at Moses, and how he actually fought with God to stay right where he was. He didn't need to be a leader, he didn't want to be a leader. He was perfectly fine doing what he was doing, yet God kept pushing him. When Moses came up with excuse after excuse of why he couldn't answer God's call, God always had a response. When he told God he was concerned about not being able to answer

peoples' questions, God said, "Don't worry. I'll give you the answers." When Moses expressed concern that he was not a good speaker, God reassured him that his brother Aaron would do that for him. Over and over again, Moses tried to put up roadblocks out of his fear and uncertainty, but over and over again, God persisted, until finally, Moses said yes.

And in the right time, God's right time in Moses' life, he became one of the first great leaders of God's people. God made a way.

Or look at Esther. Was she ready to step out in faith and risk her life to save God's people? No, she was frightened half to death, and not at all sure, she was the one who should do it. But God persisted, and through the words of another who urged her on, saying "Could it be that God has put you in this place for just such a time as this?" Esther did take the risk, step up and save God's people.

Turn to the Gospels and look at all of the people Jesus called to be disciples. They were all pretty settled in their lives. We're told about their livelihoods – many of them fisherman – established in a routine, going out day after day to catch fish to sell to the people. I don't know a lot about fisherman, but this I do know, it can be a solitary thing. A fisherman can fish for hours on end in silence, and it's okay. And now, this Jesus comes along, and says I want you to come and fish for people. What a change of life for all of them! How easy it would have been for any one of them to say, "No, that's not me. I'm not a people person. I'm happy with a fishing net in my hands, I can't imagine having to interact with people every day. I don't think I'm built for that."

Who would have blamed them had any one of them said "no" to Jesus? It would be a big, big change in their lives, they would be taking a big risk that might not work out, and maybe they thought they were too old, too established to try something new – and yet, they all said yes, and Jesus took them on a bold new adventure where not only their lives changed but so did the lives of those with whom they ministered.

Friends, we are children of a God who constantly invites us to newness of life, to try new things, to risk doing something different or doing things differently. How is it, then, that we're so reluctant to do that, that we'd much rather rest of our laurels, stay with the familiar, and not try new things? Believe me, I'm not just preaching to you, I'm preaching to myself as well. The older I get, the more it seems easier to play it safe, leave risk taking to others, leave trying new things to younger people.

Well, I want to tell you a story about someone who followed the Spirit's leading into a wonderful new time in her life – and it's the artist of the day – Charlotte Mehosky. Now, I've known Charlotte for a while, as have many of you,

but I didn't know a lot about her. I knew she was married to Ivan, was a mother and grandmother, had been a school teacher and so on. Somewhere along the way, I heard she was a painter, but I didn't know much more than that.

And then, last year, I received a Christmas card from Charlotte and Ivan, and the card was a print of a painting Charlotte had done of two little boys in our Youth Choir. When I opened it up, it took my breath away. I knew immediately who the two boys were, and I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the painting.

After that, I began to see more of Charlotte's work on Facebook, and I realized that she is an incredible, incredible painter. Not just your ordinary, run of the mill painter, but incredible. I thought to myself – what a gift she has, and how wonderful to spend a lifetime painting like that.

But get this! Listen to this! Charlotte didn't start watercolor painting until she was 58 years old! Think of how many people who, by the time they're over fifty, think there's nothing left for them to learn, or that they're too old to try something new. What if Charlotte had said that?

So, as I did with Andee and Bart, I wanted to learn Charlotte's story, so we sat down the other day and talked over breakfast. Charlotte is from Virginia and she says from a very early age she was always a planner, a detail person, a list maker. Very methodical. Also, from an early age and throughout her life, she has found herself as a caregiver.

Along the way, she met this guy named Ivan Mehosky, and their journey of life together found them living in Germany for many years, and then back here in the states where Charlotte took up a career in teaching – for many of those years in special education.

Just before she was about to retire, actually about two years ahead of her retirement, Charlotte did something that would change her life forever. She enrolled in a watercolor painting class at the Delaware College of Arts and Science with instructor Michael Robert. And in her words, when she picked up the paintbrush and started painting watercolors, it was “love at first sight.” She felt it fit her personality perfectly. Remember how I said she was a planner, a detail person – turns out that's exactly what is needed in painting watercolors. Charlotte told me that watercolor painting is a planned activity – what you want last, you have to plan for from the very beginning.

Very quickly, she says, painting moved from being a hobby to a passion. It stirs up in her gratitude for all that God has given us. As she said to me, “I can't not paint.”

She gets up every morning and paints from 4 – 6 am. It's a holy time for her. Painting opened up a place in Charlotte's heart and once she picked up that paintbrush she's never been the same again.

### SLIDE SHOW OF CHARLOTTE'S PAINTINGS

Oh, friends, what if Charlotte had said to herself, "Well, I'm getting ready to retire. I think I'll rest on my laurels, kick back and do nothing. I've learned all I need to learn, done my share of teaching." Or what if she had thought about trying painting but decided she was afraid to try, or afraid she was too old to learn something completely new?

How tragic that would have been! Indeed, how tragic it is when we settle in, when we stop stretching, or dreaming, or risking to try new things. How tragic it is when comfort and reputation keep us from reaching out in new ways! How tragic it is when we feel the Spirit nudging us, and we ignore it!

Friends, our God is a God of new and abundant life. He will take us to new and surprising places if we will only say "yes," if we will only trust him, if we will only trust that he will give us what we need along the way, if we will only risk taking that first step and going into the unknown.

When I think back on all the years I was afraid to speak in front of people, or even read the scriptures aloud in church, it makes me sad, because like Charlotte said, once I did, it changed my life. But you know what? It was in God's time, and God made a way for me – and so he will for you as well.

So be on the lookout for something new God might put in your path. Keep watch, because one day, at just the right time, you may feel it – the Holy Spirit nudging you, inviting you to step out and try something new. When that happens, friends, do it! Because you never, ever know where God will lead you, but one thing is certain, it will be good. Thanks be to God!

Amen.