

5.22.2016 Trinity Sunday (John 3:1-15)

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with Him.” (John 3:1-2)

Our Gospel reading on this Trinity Sunday is the account of how Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. This passage gives us the opportunity to realize there were honest Pharisees - men who were eager to hear and consider Jesus in a fair way. Nicodemus was one of them. He had heard of the miraculous signs, he knew that Jesus was no ordinary Rabbi, and he was ready to listen to His message. Nicodemus' greeting indicates that he thought of Jesus as a man of God, a “teacher come from God.” In time, the Holy Spirit would convince Nicodemus that Jesus actually is God – the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

Jesus responded to Nicodemus' greeting by telling him that the Kingdom of God comes by way of a new birth. “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) We've heard the term “born again Christian” so frequently that we don't stop to consider aspects of birth that should come to mind when we hear these words spoken by Jesus. For example, birth is an activity that isn't initiated by the person being born. Years before the day of our birth, none of us made the phone calls necessary to set up our parents on their first date. We had no choice as to where or how they would meet or when dad would finally muster up the courage to propose to mom. We didn't plan our own baby shower or pick the hospital where we would be born. Even when the pregnancy came to full term and we were ready to live outside our mother's body, still we did not choose to leave the womb, but relied on our mother to push us out.

Likewise, our entry into the Kingdom of God is not a process that is initiated by us. We rely completely on the grace of God for this new birth. Our condition after the fall of Adam is such that we cannot turn to faith by our own natural strength. (Article X) St. Paul tells us in Ephesians (1:4-5) that God “hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world... In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will.” We gather today not only as pardoned sinners, but as reconciled and adopted children of God, giving all the praise of our salvation to God our Heavenly Father. It was His great love that redeemed

us, that spared not His own Son, and through new birth brought us out of the darkness of the womb and into the light of an entirely new existence.

Nicodemus struggled with the idea of being born into the Kingdom of God. Jesus was using the image of birth in a way he didn't understand. So he asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3:4-6) With these words, Jesus defines the fundamental difference between the birth that brings us into this world and the birth that brings us into the Kingdom of God.

If Nicodemus were to enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, it would just be another birth into this world and not into the Kingdom of God. He would still be dead in trespasses and sins. (Ephesians 2:1) When Jesus says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh," it reminds us of the words of the Psalm 51:5. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." We are all born into this world as sinners, but Jesus introduces a different birth - a baptismal birth, a "birth of water and of the Spirit." This is the birth He describes when He says, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." This is our birth into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus compared His teaching about this new birth to the wind. He said, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8 ESV) Even today, with all those satellites and weather forecasting technology, often weathermen don't get it right. There is still a lot about the weather that we can't predict and don't understand. So with these words, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he doesn't need to completely understand this new birth any more than he understands the blowing of the wind. It is enough to "hear its sound," to feel it on your skin, to witness the effects of its power, and to believe that the Holy Spirit provides this new birth as the entry into the Kingdom of God.

Nicodemus is still struggling to keep up with Jesus. He honestly admits his confusion by asking, "How can these things be?" (John 3:9) His question indicates his confusion and the respect he has for Jesus. Rather than give up in frustration and leave, Nicodemus continues to trust Jesus to teach him. Jesus does so by revealing the cause of the problem. He said, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say

unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.” (John 3:10-11) Nicodemus is struggling because he resists the testimony of Jesus and the prophets who came before Him. The teachings of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the psalms all point forward to Him – to the Messiah. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus has most of these writings memorized, he has taught others about them, but he hasn’t received them. He struggles with the teaching of the Holy Spirit because he hasn’t received the message that is the foundation of the Word of God.

Jesus uses these words to proclaim the central teaching of the Bible. He said, “And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:13-15) As alluring as sin may be, in the end it bites us like a deadly serpent. In these verses, Jesus identifies Himself as the Remedy. He says to us, look and be saved, look and live; lift up the eyes of your faith to Christ crucified. Look to the One who came down from heaven and took on human flesh – the Son of God and the Son of Man, for the work that He was given by the Father, He completed on the Cross and now “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Romans 10:13) God the Father perfectly manifested His love for the world through God the Son by the power of God the Holy Spirit. This is the Gospel.

This is the message our Lord shared with Nicodemus and it is the Good News that He commands us to “Go” and share with the world that He gave His precious life to save. We know that Nicodemus heard and received His message, because the account of him in today’s Gospel is not the last time we read about him in Scripture. We hear of him one last time shortly after Jesus died on the cross. The Gospel according to John says, “And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.” (John 19:38-39) There were honest Pharisees, and isn’t it interesting that two of these Pharisees supervised the burial of Jesus in the tomb?

Nicodemus came to Jesus with questions, and received a lesson on the Trinity. Jesus taught him that God the Father shows His love for us by

sending His only begotten Son into the world in order to save the world. He taught that, like the serpent in the wilderness, God the Son would be raised up on the Cross in order to save the world from sin. He taught that God the Holy Spirit gives the gifts of salvation to us by giving us a new birth into the family of God. By this new birth, as reconciled and adopted children of God, we receive all the blessings that our gracious Triune God has for us ... including forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

The account of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night that we considered today took place over 2,000 years ago. After spending hours preparing this sermon and studying these verses it's easy to see parallels in my own life and the relevance of this Scripture today, but sometimes it's difficult to get that point across in just a few minutes. So, I want to conclude this sermon not with a story, but an experience. An experience that illustrates that like Nicodemus, when we seek God our Father because we're confused, because we're asking "How can these things be?" - He is listening. He will answer.

My wife's grandma passed away about two weeks ago at the age of 101. We can all recognize the fact that you don't live to 101 without facing great challenges. Her greatest challenge was found in outliving so many of the people she loved. She outlived three husbands and both of her children. She celebrated her 100th birthday in her own home, but the last year of her life was very difficult. Her health declined, she went completely blind, and spent all day every day just sitting in her chair. We visited a lot and both questioned how these trials could fit into God's plan for her life.

The night she passed away, Ashley and I were sitting with her. She couldn't speak to us anymore, but we were on either side of her, just talking, when Ashley said, "Why don't we do a crossword?" Grandma loved crosswords! They truly made her happy even on her darkest day. I used to read the clues to her and even at 101 she was still getting many of the words solved before I could. She and I had been working through this book of crosswords and Ashley got it out and started reading the clues out loud. We struggled a bit and had to use the eraser a couple times, but finally made it to the last clue. A three letter word for "under the weather" that starts with an "A". Ashley said to me, "Ail." Then turned to grandma and said, "We could have used your help on that one, grandma!" Grandma never took another breath.

I'm standing there asking Ashley if she just witnessed the same thing I did -

that God took grandma home, He ended this chapter of her life and began another on the last clue of a crossword. The nursing staff was checking on her every two hours and at that moment a nurse walked into the room. She checked for a pulse and looked at her watch to record the time of death. A few minutes later, when I was asked by a hospice worker what time she passed away, I turned to the nurse and asked, "What time was it when you looked at your watch?" She said, "8:28" and I knew instantly, without a doubt, that our prayer had been answered. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

Grandma and I asked God time and again, "How can these things be?" God answered, "Through all the tragedy, through all the trials, through all the suffering... I've been there all along - working all things for your good." God is at work in our lives. Our greatest assurance of that fact is found when we lift up the eyes of our faith to Christ crucified. For "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)