

6.12.2022 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 our Lord. 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 complete the labor that led to our birth.

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 failure of our first parents in the Garden of Eden is such that we can’t turn to faith by our own natural strength (Article X), God must draw us to Him (John 6:44), and therefore as we gather today as reconciled and adopted children of God, we give all the praise of our salvation to Him,

for 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. In a spiritual sense, 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 fallen world, but Jesus introduces a different birth - a new, 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 the satellites and weather forecasting technology, often meteorologists 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 our Lord. Rather than give up in frustration and leave, Nicodemus continues to trust Jesus to teach him, and He does so by revealing the cause of the problem. Jesus 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’s taught others about them, but he hasn’t received them himself. 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 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 tells us, “*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 provides for us ... including forgiveness, salvation, and life everlasting with Him and one another in His heavenly kingdom.