

“Starting Again” (Trinity Sunday)

John 3:1-17 (NET Bible)

Now a certain man, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus at night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus replied, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time, can he?” Jesus answered, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must all be born from above.’ The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus replied, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you don’t understand these things? I tell you the solemn truth, we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. If I have told you people about earthly things and you don’t believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses *lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him.

SERMON

The lectionary reading for today, Trinity Sunday, is the well-known story of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus that we heard earlier from John chapter 3. The gospel writer is a master craftsman in retelling a story and making it a teachable moment for his readers. This story is appropriate for today because it weaves together the loving God, who gave Jesus to the world, with the Holy Spirit who gives us new life. The story ends with two verses that are some of the most memorable lines in Scripture. However, the language and imagery are more complex than one might imagine at first glance, since an intelligent man like Nicodemus fails to understand the words that John puts into the mouth of Jesus. I hope you will follow with me as we explore elements of this passage and seek to apply it to our context here today.

Nicodemus was a devout religious leader who was also a member of the highest legislative and judicial body amongst the Jews. John begins his account by emphasizing that Nicodemus fails to recognize who Jesus really is – just like many of the Jewish leaders of the day. In verse two, Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is “a *teacher* who has come from God because no one could

perform the miraculous signs that he did and less God was with him.” Nicodemus therefore recognizes Jesus as a prophet - a messenger authorized by God. Yet John’s gospel begins with the powerful prologue that we often read at Christmas. He informs us there that Jesus is the *Divine Word made human*; Jesus *is* a prophet, yes, but John wants his readers to appreciate that Jesus is much more than that. His miracles point to him being God’s Chosen One - the long expected Messiah.

Jesus replies to Nicodemus with the peculiar phrase: “I tell you the solemn truth; unless a person is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.” As we read the story we kind of wonder how you go from that seemingly polite opening greeting of Nicodemus to Jesus’ blunt reply, one which significantly raises the conversation’s level of seriousness. It is as if Jesus is saying, “let’s cut out the compliments and get straight to business.”

“You must be born from above”, says Jesus, which is also commonly translated as being “born anew” or “born again”. John, writing in Greek, uses a word (*anōthen*) that has a *double meaning*: you must be born “from above” and you must be “born anew”. Translators recognize the problem: there isn’t a similar word in English with such a double meaning, and neither was there a corresponding word in Aramaic, the language Jesus would have spoken! Appreciating the dramatic irony in John’s wordplay provides, I think, powerful insights to his overall message. Just as there is more than one meaning to the word that John uses, and *both* are *necessary*, so there is more to life than *physical* reality; there is a *spiritual* dimension that is vitally important if we want to be fully alive.

Nicodemus assumes only the physical meaning, focusing on being “born anew”, and recognizes the physical impossibility of reentering the womb for that to happen. He is therefore stuck in a two-dimensional ‘flatland’.¹ He needs to perceive a new dimension - a third dimension: “from above”. Experiencing the kingdom of God does not arise by *illumination*, says Jesus, but through *regeneration* by the Holy Spirit. It is not about *seeing* things differently using human reason, but about *becoming* a new being – or a new creation, as St Paul would put it – which can *only* be a work of God or “from above”.

John then gives a little proverbial commentary on the implications of being born of the spirit, again employing Greek wordplay using the word *pneuma* to talk of spirit *and* wind.

“The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit.”

Last Sunday was Pentecost, we can see - from Luke’s account of the birthday of the church in Acts chapter 2 - similar images of an unpredictable blowing wind giving new life in surprising ways. In Peter’s first sermon, he quoted the prophet Joel who said that God’s Spirit blows like a mighty wind and has no respect for status, gender, age, or race – *God’s Spirit is for everybody*.

As John moves on in his teachable moment he says no one has *ascended* into heaven except the One

¹ This refers to Edwin Abbott Abbott’s classic novella *Flatland*, published in 1884.

who *descended* from heaven – the Son of Man, referring to another prophecy in Daniel 7. This is a complicated but important theme within John’s gospel. In Jewish thinking at that time, Moses was thought to have ascended to heaven to receive the Ten Commandments and then descended again to distribute it to the people. In contrast to those Jewish legends, John reminds his readers that Jesus is the *only* person who has made a genuine *ascent* to heaven, an event that happened after the resurrection - remembering that Jesus first *descended* from heaven in the incarnation, when he was born. I think John is emphasizing the ongoing *relationship* between God and humankind and his freedom to communicate, whether that is through prophets, or angels, or whether God comes directly as Jesus - the Son of Man. Jesus therefore *knows* all about heavenly things, says John. Consequently, the language of ascending and the descending shouldn’t make us think that heaven is a *distant* and somewhere *up* there, rather the physical and the spiritual are intimately interlinked - so closely that it does not inhibit direct communication. One day we will see reality as it truly is, but for now all we ever get are glimpses.

This implied reference to Moses and talk of ascension prompts John to make reference to a number of physical acts of *raising*. Moses *lifted up* the bronze serpent on a stick so that anyone who looked at God’s provision for healing would be made whole. In the same way, Christ’s ascension is a *continual process* that begins with Jesus being physically *lifted up* on the cross at his crucifixion, to Christ being *raised* from the dead in the resurrection, and finally, his *return* back to God in heaven. For John, all three actions are referred to as Christ’s *exaltation* or *glorification*.

And then in John 3:16 we read of the lavish, limitless, love of God that embraces the whole world. God gave his unique, “one-of-a-kind” Son so that whoever believes in God’s chosen Messiah will be born of the Spirit - and so will enjoy the fullness of life, as defined by God - not by humans. The life the Spirit gives is the intimate, unending presence of God - not everlasting human existence. It is a life that begins now, not in the future after we die.

So what else can we learn from this text for *us* today, in 2015?

First, do we have an attitude like that of Nicodemus, who begins his conversation: “we *know this* is what you *must* be like, Jesus, because...”? Jesus points out that Nicodemus doesn’t understand much at all. It’s not that Nicodemus is totally wrong; it’s just that he has an incomplete picture because he’s trying to understand *heavenly* things in an *earthly* way. Instead we should be sensitive to the Holy Spirit so as to make sense of *earthly things* in a *heavenly way*.

The evangelist wants all his readers – including us - to be *challenged* and *changed* by his story. Being born anew *and* being born from above, comes about with our recognition that the full character of God is revealed in Jesus. That Jesus is the very image of God, not merely a good teacher, and he is God’s gift given *to* the world *from* a God who passionately *loves* the world. The God, revealed in Jesus, demonstrates a love that knows no bounds and only asks that we *receive* the gift. God’s *gift* of Jesus is to rescue and restore the whole world to himself, so there *are* consequences to rejecting God’s

generous gift. For those who have never been born from above, today a good day to receive the gift of Jesus Christ and be born anew.

Second, today also marks a time when this church has to *begin again*, to *start afresh*. The church has been blessed with Pastor X's ministry for over 30 years. With her retirement, it is quite normal to have feelings of loss and a sense of uncertainty as you look to the future. This is both a scary time and an exciting opportunity. I acknowledge that this is no easy matter, but Christ's exaltation was also no easy matter either. It required Jesus to be faithful in his life, even through suffering on the cross. But God vindicated Jesus in raising him from the dead and has given him full honors. Just as God has been faithful in the past, so God will continue his regenerating work of the Spirit. Pentecost, which we all celebrated in the life of the Church, last Sunday, is the sign that God's presence continues to be with us as a community moving forward. What God did on that first birthday of the Church, God *can do again* in new times and new situations.

In conclusion, abundant life comes through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; it is not a work of human effort or wisdom. As you look to the future don't focus on mere earthly things and only think in a 2-dimensional flatland. Instead, seek heavenly things too and recognize things as they really are – in 3 dimensions. Look forward in hope; focus on the One who was lifted up for the whole world, for he is the gateway to life in all its fullness. AMEN.