

From Night to Day

The Holy Trinity
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June 11, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29
Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

“Hi Pastor, I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute or two.” Many years ago, in another parish, a tall young man had put his head inside my study door and spoke those words. That encounter was to have a dramatic effect on both our lives.

In much the same way Nicodemus sneaks through the dark to where Jesus is staying in order to talk to him about matters of faith. And here we are, refugees from a very dark world gathered to worship God, to hear the scriptures read and proclaimed, and to hear again the good news that we are God’s beloved daughters and sons.

The young man who came to see me in my study had come to see me almost secretly. He had left home some years before and gone off to live in the big city and make his way in the world. Living in the fast lane in the city he had contracted aids. He had returned home to cope with his illness and admit to his family that he was gay. While his parents allowed him to live in his home, his extended family had told him he would die and go to hell and had read him numerous passages from scripture to prove to him that he was condemned.

There he was standing in the doorway of my study peering out of the darkness of the hallway and asking to come in and talk. He wanted to know if God hated him, if God would ever forgive him, and would he ever have a chance of entering the kingdom of heaven. That was the first of many conversations. He began coming to church and you could count on him being there every Sunday when he wasn’t too sick. But there were two things that really troubled him. He hadn’t been born again, and he hadn’t been baptized.

Nicodemus is in great difficulty also. He is a religious leader of the people, dedicated to following the Law of Moses, and observing all the details required of such a person. Besides being a very faithful man of God he was also very thoughtful and observant. Nicodemus had been following what Jesus had been doing and saying. The problem, at least for Nicodemus, and the people among whom Nicodemus lived and worked, was where did Jesus get the power and knowledge he possessed. Was he some sort of grand magician who could do all sorts of wonderful things? Was He a special prophet that God had sent among the people to bring them to new ways of faithful living and being? Or, horror of horrors, was he an instrument of evil possessing all the black powers of the wicked one?

Whatever the source of His power, Jesus was causing a great deal of concern because He was doing everything a good and faithful Jewish man shouldn’t be doing. He was regularly seen in

the company of tax collectors and sinners. Why, he even sat down and had meals with them. Much to their horror He proclaimed teachings that went against much of what they considered to be the right way to live and act. But Nicodemus, being the type of leader he was, noticed the compassion Jesus had for the people and how the people whose lives He touched were healed and cleansed and renewed. For Nicodemus there was only one possible conclusion, and that was, Jesus must be a special person sent by God. So Nicodemus went to check out his conclusion by visiting Jesus and talking to him about what he thought. The gospel writer tells us Nicodemus came at night: First, so as not to be discovered and, second, to show that people like Nicodemus, who did not recognize God in Jesus, really were in the dark themselves. So Nicodemus meets Jesus and checks things out. But instead of giving Nicodemus a simple answer,

Jesus responds with these statements about being born from above and born of the spirit.

We are fortunate for we know more now than what Nicodemus knew then. More particularly, on this, the first Sunday after Pentecost, we know that the Holy Spirit was sent as our divine companion, so that while Jesus had returned to God, people here on earth would not be left alone. Now that gift, of the Holy Spirit, is given to each of us in our baptism. It is the gift sent directly from God through Jesus Christ to us, so we are, as Jesus puts it, born from above, born of the Spirit, or, as some want to say, born again.

Knowing that this is complex enough to grasp, the church uses oil to signify what is happening. Just as the water of baptism signifies our being washed clean, so the oil signifies our being gifted with the Holy Spirit. This is what makes Baptism so important and why this font is so central to what we are doing. Baptism is a once in a life time event, never to be repeated, but the font is here so that whenever we wish we may dip our fingers into it and make the sign of the cross in remembrance of our Baptism. In that way we are given a powerful reminder that not only are we God's beloved children, brothers and sisters of Christ, but we are also filled with the Holy Spirit.

We are born from above, born again.

Of course, Nicodemus is still confused and bewildered.. Why, he might even be speaking for us, when in an exasperated tone he says to Jesus, "How can these things be?" It is then that Jesus utters the words that not only confirm what Nicodemus has suspected all along, but offer to him the very gift of salvation itself apart from all, the religious work he has done as a religious leader in Israel.

The words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus have become famous the world over. Just as those words gave assurance and hope to Nicodemus, so too, they give assurance and hope to us and to all who hear them. Jesus said, "'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed , God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'"

This was the message which gave the young man who had come to talk with me great hope and

encouragement. We had many more meetings, and in the course of our discussions it wasn't long before he asked if I would baptize him. But as soon as he understood that I would baptize him during a Sunday worship service he balked at the idea. He couldn't bring himself to be so public. Then very early one Saturday morning, while it was still dark, I was called to the local hospital. The young man who had been admitted earlier in the week had taken a marked turn for the worse. The family was with him at the bedside and he was trying to say something, but no one could understand him. The family asked the hospital to summon me to his bedside and see if I could hear what it was he was trying to say.

When I arrived in his room the family made way for me and I asked him what he wanted. He struggled to form the words. Even with my ear against his lips I couldn't make out what it was he was trying to say. I stood by the bed defeated, and then it dawned on me what he wanted. I asked him if he wanted to be baptized and he answered with a barely perceptible nod. Water was brought, and as I was baptizing him the sun rose and sunlight streamed through the windows into the room. Then as I anointed him with oil he smiled, relaxed, and with a sigh surrendered himself to the all embracing love of God.

The night had passed. Day had come.

Amen.