

Lent 2A 2020 SSP

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; St. John 3:1-17

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Nicodemus was a leader in Israel. He sat on the Sanhedrin, the supreme religious council which was soon to condemn Jesus and hand him over to Pilate. Nonetheless, Nicodemus had the eyes and ears to see and hear what Jesus was teaching and doing. He visited Jesus by night because he knew his fellow leaders' hostility to Jesus. It was dangerous and he stayed off their radar screen and went to visit Jesus after dark. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God: for no man can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him."

Jesus replied that no one can see the kingdom of God except by being born again, or born from above. When Nicodemus, perhaps wearily, asked how can a man do that – absurdly by entering his mother's womb a second time? – Jesus went further, saying one must be born of water and the Spirit to enter God's kingdom. Water references cleansing, washing away the dirt of an old life – as in baptism. The Spirit is like the wind; it blows where it wills. You must breathe it in as fresh air. You must put up a sail and either tack or run with its power.

Nicodemus answered, how can these things be? But Jesus said this is only the beginning! The new birth by water and the Spirit is just the start of the journey. Heavenly things are yet to come. The Son of man from heaven will be lifted up, like Moses' lifting up the bronze serpent on the pole in the wilderness to heal the Israelites of their snakebites.¹ Jesus will be lifted up on a

¹ Numbers 21:7-9

cross, where all who look to him will be healed of sin and death. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

That was a lot for one evening visit, enough for Nicodemus. But Nicodemus shows up at the end of the story, and we shall return to him.

Jesus was right to say, “Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand this?” Nicodemus should have remembered Father Abraham, whose life as we know it began at age 75, when he heeded God’s call to leave his settled life and go on an adventure with no return in the land of Canaan, the Promised Land to Abraham and his posterity. Talk about putting up a sail! Abraham fell down laughing when the Lord told him he and Sarah would become new parents at an age when, as Scripture says, they were as good as dead.

What is the message here? It says that God is God; that if God chooses to begin a new people with oldsters, a new life in an old man and an old woman, he can and will. The Spirit blows where it wills, and we cannot figure it out. It also says that we have before us, wherever we are on life’s way, the prospect, this very moment, of a fresh start, a new life, with the Lord. Consider how this applies to Saint Stephen’s Church at this moment in our history.

Listen to these words from Psalm 63. They seem to speak to the old and tired, to the world-weary, to the burned-out, to the doubting and skeptical: “O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee. My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh also longeth after thee, in a barren and dry land where no water is... *For thy loving kindness is better than the life itself: my lips shall praise thee.*”²

² Ps 63 1928 BCP (Coverdale) version.

Did you catch that? God's presence, his loving kindness, is better than life itself. God's experienced presence *is* eternal life. The experience of God's grace *is* the new birth from above, the entry into God's kingdom, here and now, every day, breaking into this perishing world with its exhausted kingdoms, and opening out into the glory of heaven.

Nicodemus was attracted by Jesus enough to visit him by night. He saw and heard plenty that night – enough so that when the chief priests and Pharisees prepared to condemn Jesus, Nicodemus protested the injustice of the proceedings. His is one of the good voices in Christ's Passion, and the enemies of the Lord promptly accused Nicodemus of being a disciple of Jesus. In the end Nicodemus went to the tomb, along with Joseph of Arimathea, another member of the council who was a disciple of Jesus, with precious ointments for Jesus' body.³

Well there you go, Saint Nicodemus, led by decency and fairness into the camp of Jesus! Why do we imagine his name was remembered at all in the Gospel? I would love to meet this true son of Abraham and follower of Jesus, not by night, but when we have all the time in the world in the bright day of heaven.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

³ Jn 7:50; 19:39