



Holy Trinity Sunday
30 May 2021

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

John 3:1-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Every-so-often someone will send me a text message and only their number will appear. Sometimes I am able to figure out who sent the message from the question they ask or a reference point of spouse or child or activity. Much of the time, after reading the text message a couple of times and doing my best mental gymnastics – I will finally decide to take the leap and reply with a three-word phrase, who is this? This happened to me awhile back – I received a message from someone who asked how I was feeling after a pancreatitis episode. I responded and then realized I had no idea who sent the text message. I decided to just let it go. But later on that week, I texted a pastor friend asking if he might be free for coffee not realizing I had his phone number and someone else's name attached. All of a sudden, I had Jan Zastrow texting me about an invitation to coffee. Realizing I had the wrong name with the wrong number, I thought I was texting Jan to apologize but then Steve responded asking me what I was apologizing for. The last thing Jan wrote in her text to me was, "guessing this will be in a sermon someday." Yep Jan, today is the day. At least I think it was Jan.

So, I think I have a pretty good idea about how Nicodemus is feeling when he decides to track down Jesus in the middle of the night. He has followed all the rules – for his whole life. And all of that rule following has earned him a place at the big table – he is a Pharisee – someone who follows strict observance of the traditional and written law, and commonly held to have pretensions to superior sanctity. In other words, he was pretty full of himself about his knowledge about God's law and made sure others knew it. Except. Nicodemus is confused. Except, something is missing – he is not sure what is missing – but somewhere deep inside of Nicodemus there is a hunger gnawing at him, asking the question, "is this all there is?"

At one time or another, I imagine that we all play the character of Nicodemus. Confident in who you are and where you are going, proud of your accomplishments, secure in the stability of the life you have built for yourself. And then one day – out of nowhere – you are stopped in your tracks wondering, now that you have fashioned your small corner of the world into perfection, "is this all there is?" Sometimes the question comes from deep within us – sometimes the question comes from a friend or family member – sometimes the question comes from the shock of an unexpected revelation, "is this all there is?"

Now Nicodemus has a head start on most of us – he has no doubts that Jesus is from God. Nicodemus also respects Jesus as a teacher and trusts what Jesus says, even if he is unable to fully understand the meaning of Jesus' words. "Very truly, I tell you," says Jesus, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind ⁹ blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to Jesus, "How can these things be?"

There is not a moment in this conversation where Nicodemus questions the truth of what Jesus is saying – there is however, an honest confusion for Nicodemus that leads Jesus to explain things more clearly. And what we get in verse 16 is one of the most quoted verses in the entire bible: ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." And what is often left out in the quoting is the next verse – which in this life we live today – is the more important verse I think. ¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world



Holy Trinity Sunday
30 May 2021

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

might be saved through him. "How can these things be?" Nicodemus asks. Perhaps we are asking the same question.

There are times, I believe, where we in the church are in danger of, what author Ann Weems describes as, becoming a tearless people, unable to rage even in a starless abyss. "We have imitated a smiling society," she writes, "glossing over the hurt, the oppression, the peacelessness on earth, or we have become caustic and cynical and despairing. Insisting on looking the other way as other members of the body of Christ crawl to the altar, the scraps of their lives in their arms. We were created for promise keeping and yet, we are in danger of becoming a blind hearted people, buying into the system, placing our hope with kings and corporations. Have we not seen? Have we not heard? How can these things be?"

We persist in clinging to the way things are, or eagerly placing our faith in the newest religious author, the latest book on how-to Christianity in just ten easy steps, or the current slogans presented as though they were the Word of God. We are programming and papering ourselves into perpetuity and rationalizing and excusing our immorality. We spend our energy in complaining, gloomily forecasting our future together. We panic for positions, in employment and committee, with each special interest group vying for first place in the kingdom. Perhaps it's time for remembering that Jesus stood in the Jordan to be baptized with the others, long ago casting his lot, not with the good church people, but with the poor wherever that poverty might emerge. His name is Emmanuel, God with us, and yet, individually, and corporately, we have named him, God-with-me. Have we not seen? Have we not heard? How can these things be?"

In the light of the cross, the alternative is anything but hopelessness. On the contrary! There is every scriptural indication that we are called to change who we are into the kingdom of God. Where change is possible, new resurrections wait to be revealed."

I wonder if this is what Nicodemus was wrestling with when he went to visit Jesus in the middle of the night? It occurs to me that Nicodemus was faithfully waiting for the Messiah to come. And although he may not have known he was meeting the chosen one of God when he met Jesus that night, Nicodemus believed something new was happening in the world as heard the stories of miracles travel on the wind. Water turned into wine. The deaf hear. The blind see. The lame walk. The sick are healed. The broken are made new. Even the dead are raised to new life. How can these things be? Like Nicodemus, we too, need only to ask the question to trust that God is doing a new thing.

Where change is possible, new resurrections wait to be revealed.

It is Memorial Day weekend. It took me a few years, as pastor, to figure out who to honor on which day... Memorial Day is meant to honor those who have died serving in the military. Veterans Day recognizes all who have served in the armed forces. I wonder what the world would look like today, if the countless men and women who died in service to our country did not believe that change was possible? What if those who have died to protect the values we hold so dear did not believe in the possibility of a new world where new resurrections waited to be revealed? The end of a brutal dictatorship. Resurrection. The surrender of one country or another as they slaughtered their own people for their ancestry or their beliefs. Resurrection. The end of the silence of countless voices for the concluded oppression of a country's people who found their voices and birthed a new nation and government. Resurrection. How can these things be?"

For God so loved the world. 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. Where change is possible, new resurrections wait to be revealed. In your life. In our nation. And by the promise of God – for all the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.