

June 7, 2009 Trinity Sunday

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

Sermon Title: Nicodemus: The Battle Between Light and Darkness

Call to Worship: Adapted from Psalm 29

Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones,  
Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due God's name;  
Worship the Lord in the splendor of God's holiness.  
The voice of the Lord is over the waters;  
The God of glory thunders,  
The Lord thunders over the mighty waters.  
The voice of the Lord is powerful;  
The voice of the Lord is majestic.  
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;  
All in God's temple cry, "Glory";  
The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;  
The Lord is enthroned as King forever.  
The Lord gives strength to God's people;  
The Lord blesses The People of God with Peace!

Hymns: #485 To God Be The Glory

#131 Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow

#2172 We Are Called (or) #2211 Faith is Patience in the Night

New Hymn: Nicodemus Came Seeking Words by Rev. Robert E. Button

Nicodemus came in the dark of the night, He wanted to know, He wanted to know.  
His heart and his mind were seeking the light, He searched for the truth about Christ.  
In the light of truth we cannot fail, for the truth does not hide  
And the darkness never will prevail when the truth of Christ in us abides.

Christ said to Nick, "I'll tell you the truth", those born again, the Kingdom will see  
Only those born of water and spirit, will enter the Kingdom of God  
For the Spirit will come like the wind that blows, you cannot hear nor can you see  
So it is with those who're born again, when the Spirit of God sets them free.

Nicodemus said to Christ on that eve, how can that be?, how can that be?  
Once a person's born, rebirth cannot be, to go back defies what we believe.  
But our Lord knew 'bout the heavenly things, Nick knew not, Nick knew not.  
Eternal Life comes to those who believe in Christ, brings new light into a darkened world

For God so love the world that God did give, His only Son, His only Son  
So those who believe eternally shall live, and bask in the light of Christ's Love.  
For the light has come into the world, so that darkness would cease.  
And our God has loved the world so much that his only Son He did give.

Prayer of Confession:

from: Whispers of God

“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a person of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” Holy God, we have lived as a people enslaved to the gods of this world, victims of our own misplaced passions. We have embraced the ways of death and turned from the challenge of rebirth. The paths we have chosen lead to dead ends, and the direction we have followed brings only confusion and despair. Help us, O God, for we cannot help ourselves. Amen.

June 7, 2009     Trinity Sunday  
Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17  
Sermon Title: Nicodemus: Transforming the Routine

Have you ever noticed how much we humans love a routine. There is something in us that makes us feel comfortable with the simple repetition of what we like. Indeed, the syncopation of nature is a routine to which we have grown accustomed. Here in Virginia at least we are used to having four distinct seasons of the year. The hard cold winter is followed by the awakening of Spring with its many colors and new life, while Summer brings us hotter days and lush gardens and wonderful vegetables, and all of this gives way to the Fall colors with that wonderful aroma of falling leaves and nippy evenings. It's the routine that we like. Each year we know that things will be the same, or at least close to the same. There is safety in knowing the routine. In our work life there is a certain routine. Factory workers report each day to do the same repetitive maneuvers which produce furniture, or shirts and pants, or widgets. And much of the disillusionment that has occurred with the loss of manufacturing jobs in this country is that the jobs which have been lost were routine oriented. Folks knew that if they showed up and did their jobs they would receive a pay check. Thoughts of breaking out of the mold and starting up their own businesses, or developing their own products and earning a living in an unconventional way are just too frightening to many folks.

Well, most of us are like that. We do not want to break the mold. We do not want to be on the cutting edge. We do not want to stand out in the crowd. We do not feel comfortable in unfamiliar territory and unfamiliar situations. You can call us traditionalists if you want, but most of all, we like knowing what is expected of us in life.

I can remember back in college. My first two years didn't go too well. But somewhere about the beginning of my Junior year a friend shared with me that it wasn't difficult making good grades for those professors. All you had to do was figure out during the first week of classes what the professors wanted and then feed it back to them. My whole college experience changed. Find out how the professor wanted test questions answered, and then give him what he wanted. It was amazing how my grades improved. I learned the routine of a College Education.

We are like that in our Religious Life as well. I know it sounds a little manipulative, but isn't that what we do with our Religious Life. Becoming a good member of a church requires that we learn the order of service and the Apostles' Creed and how to sing a few hymns. And we love the Church Bulletin because it puts order into our religious life. How would you feel if you came to worship on Sunday morning and the bulletin was blank? Or, perhaps it simply said: "Welcome to Worship" "This Morning we are going to sing some songs, have a prayer of two, take up an offering and if there is time, hear a message from the scriptures." And we are going to get it all done in 60 minutes.

Some of us would not feel very comfortable. Including the preacher. This preacher needs the order of worship. It cuts down on spontaneity. But it is much more

comfortable. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary says that "routine is a regular course of procedure; habitual or mechanical performance of an established procedure."

Sadly enough, much that passes for religion and faith in today's world are simply the "habitual or mechanical performance of an established procedure". But wait a minute, this isn't a modern day development. This "religion by routine" has existed in every age and within every form of religion. All you have to do is read through the Old Testament to discover that the early faith of the Children of Israel was highly routinized. Observe, for instance the way that the Israelite Children marched on their trek toward the promised land. The twelve tribes marched in preset order with the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant in the center of the line of march. And notice also the strict rules of worship in the book of Leviticus. Every detail of how one brought an animal to the tabernacle to be offered up as a burnt offering was specified. And even the food that you ate was seen as a religious obligation. Certain foods were to be rejected as dishonoring God.

And not just in the Judeo-Christian tradition. One of the things about our present conflict in the Middle East has been the awareness which we are all gaining of the practices of Islam. Five times a day an adherent to Islam must spread out his prayer cloth and face East, toward Mecca, and offer prayers to Alah. Talk about routine!

Our passage from John gives us an opportunity to gain some insight into the traditions and routines which Jesus faced throughout his ministry. Essentially it is a simple story. Nicodemus seeks Jesus in the dark of the night. He confesses to Jesus that he, along with some others in the Ruling Council, acknowledge that Jesus is a Teacher from God. Mainly because of the miracles which Christ has performed.

Jesus takes this opportunity to establish a very profound concept: "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Now, right away I am asking you to forget much of what you have believed or been taught about this concept of being "born again". Down through the years, a faction of the Church of Jesus Christ has co-opted this term and used it as a litmus test for who is and who is not a part of God's Kingdom. I have even heard folks recite from memory the day and the hour when they were "saved" and were "born again" as if it were a magical moment brought about by some charismatic preacher. "Oh yes, I was saved on June 7, 1999 by preacher Joe Smith at a revival at his church." That is so out of sync with what Jesus understood about being born again. And the only way we have of knowing this is by looking at the context in which Jesus mentions it. It is in the context of an encounter with one of the religious leaders of Israel... Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedren, the ruling council of all Judaism.

We all know the story. Even little children can tell us of how Nicodemus sought out Jesus in the dark of the night. And if they are really smart children they can recite from memory John 3:16,17. But you have to do some real study of the scriptures to understand the forces that were moving behind the scenes of Nicodemus' amazing statement.

So, what was going on? Well, what was taking place was a real debate in the Sanhedren about Jesus of Nazareth. While there was a strong anti-Jesus faction, there was also a small group of Rabbi who saw in Jesus they had not experienced before. Two of the leaders who wanted to know more about Jesus, and who might already have found themselves on Jesus' side were Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. John Calvin notes that Nicodemus was judged by the company he kept, namely, Joseph of Aramathea, whom John describes as "a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews." (Jn 19:38) What Calvin understood was that Nicodemus was also a secret disciple who visited Jesus at night out of fear of the Jews. It is also interesting to note that during his lifetime, John Calvin labeled all those in France who were evangelicals at heart, but Roman Catholics in practice as "Nicodemites." In the 1500's there was so much fear of the Roman Catholic Church that many people who believed in the new Reformation Movement spearheaded by Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Knox and Zwingli, were afraid to come out in the open. Today, we might call them "Closet Christians".

Soren Kierkegaard that great 18<sup>th</sup> century Theologian from Sweden sees Nicodemus as "someone who only partially associated himself with Jesus, but who held back from a full and public commitment to him because of his fear of persecution from his own people." Surely there is truth in both Calvin and Kierkegaard's understanding, but we should never remember that in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, only Nicodemus argues in the Sanhedren against outright condemnation of Jesus. He argues "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"

We have set the stage. Nicodemus comes in the night. Along with a few others in high places, he has begun to believe that there is something extrodinary about this Jesus fellow. And when he tells Jesus that, Jesus completely ignores his positive statement. Instead, Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter of faith and religion. If Nicodemus thought he was going to get a few words from Jesus that he could carry back to the other members of the Sanhedrean he is sorely mistaken. Instead Jesus cuts to the quick and says: "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Of course Nicodemus misunderstands completely. It is not about earthly birth. It is about spiritual birth. And that is something you cannot quantify. It is not about the things we can touch and feel. Like the wind, you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going, but you can experience the effects of the wind. Zwingli, that great reformer from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and a contemporary of both Luther and Calvin points out Jesus and Nicodemus were speaking in two different languages. Jesus in the language of faith and Nicodemus in the language of flesh. And the point that Jesus is making to Nicodemus is that rebirth is a spiritual matter and is not subject to human control and cannot be coordinated to what we know of the rest of the world.

What Nicodemus faced was the frustration of trying to live and operate in the Religious Routine of Jewish Life and at the same time be challenged by the reformative and redemptive power of the Spirit of God. To be born again in Christ's context meant to allow God's Spirit to reorient your total understanding of what it meant to be religious.

Emmanuel Lartey notes that “Religion often becomes a matter of the correct observance of particular practices. When these practices become routine, they may actually serve to hinder spiritual sensitivity. A spiritual transformation in such situation is very much needed.”

This is not just the spot that Jesus encountered with Nicodemus, it is the spot at which Christ encounters us. We are locked into traditions and routines which may in fact hinder our faith journey. We hear words like: We’ve always done it this way. Or This is how our grandfathers worshiped. And we know right away that the Spirit of Christ is having a hard time breaking through to our innermost beings.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night and confessed that Jesus was a Teacher sent from God he pointed to the wondrous miracles and signs that everyone had seen in Jesus, but what he was really saying, but could not express it was that he was experiencing a new Spirit in Jesus. Nicodemus simply did not have the understanding and the language to say: we know you are a teacher who comes from God. Because we have seen the Spirit of God in you.” He couldn’t say that because the Jewish Religious experience was not based on the Holy Spirit, but upon the tradition of the Elders... and that is a dead end street.

Rebirth becomes the transformation of one’s heart and mind to think spiritually about the world and about one’s relationship with The Creator. Nicodemus was almost there, but not quite. This is the hardest transformation that we humans ever experience. It demands that we let go of old ways, thoughts, understandings, traditions, processes and practices and simply let the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit flow through us. It is not easy. We are all captives to our place in life.

Now, here is the reward. For those who can even begin the journey of transformation, there will be the reality of John 3:16 in their lives. John 3:16 will not be a passage for memorization.... It will become a fact of life that alters and changes every relationship we have in this life, including the relationship we have with God.

And the end result may be that you still come to Church. And you still say the Lord’s Prayer, and you still sing the hymns, and you might even listen to the sermon with new ears.....but they won’t be routine any more. There will be new life in the old words. There will be new meaning in the old song. There will be new purpose in the everyday living of life. And, according to Jesus, if you are born again.....

You will understand that Light has come into the world  
You will understand that left to your own devices you will choose darkness  
You will know that when you live by the truth and light, others will plainly see that everything you do will be done through God.

When you start to feel that transition taking place in your life, then you can rejoice and say to yourself, “I have been reborn in Christ.” Amen.



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