

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 3:1-18

"The Way is Clear"

Today's Holy Gospel raises an important question that a Jewish leader had to go and ask. This man, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Temple Leadership, came to Jesus at night to speak with our Savior. He needed to know some clarity about some of Jesus' teachings.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and on the Ruling Council, came to inquire of Jesus about some of His teachings and His miracles. Jesus told him *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* (John 3:3) This must have been something that was sticking in Nicodemus' craw because here is this 'high, holy man' sneaking out at night so that nobody would see him, so that he could go and meet with Jesus. Jesus must have confused Nicodemus, because he told Jesus that no one can be reborn into their mother's womb. Jesus clarified this for him saying, *"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."* (John 3:5) This new birth Jesus that is talking about is the same that John the Baptist spoke about in John 1:33 *"The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit."* You see, having a relationship with our Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ will change you and transform you forever! I would bet that if I went around the room and I asked you what you used to be like – we would hear 'some' stories! Each one of us has a story to tell about how God cleaned us up and made us totally different. Some of you have known and celebrated Jesus for as long as you can remember – like our youngsters. God doesn't need to clean them up, but each one of us has been transformed in one way or another.

These two baptisms are closely joined. This double-sided new birth, which brings you into the visible community of Jesus' followers (water-baptism) and gives you the new life of the spirit welling up like a spring of water inside you (spirit-baptism). The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17 giving us a clear example of the results of this new birth: *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"*

Last week we celebrated the birthday of the church, Pentecost, the day in which the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles and changed them forever. We talked about the Hebrew word for spirit and wind are the same word – "ruach." Jesus tells Nicodemus in verse 8, that the Spirit of God is on the move, like a fresh spring breeze. Look at verse 8 on page 1650 of your Pew Bibles – John chapter 3 verse 8. *"the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going."* What a crystal-clear example that is so true – and how we need to feel the winds effects on us – the Spirit of God's effects in our lives.

In verses 10– 13 Jesus gets down to the 'nitty gritty' in convicting the leadership, and the faith and knowledge that comes only from God, from heaven, from the Son of Man, saying, *"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?" "Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony." "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how*

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then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man." (John 3:10-13) Can you imagine how Nicodemus must have felt to be told this. Here is a very well-respected man and senior teacher in the Temple. But this way of knowing, and the new knowledge we get through it, is given by the mysterious ‘*Son of Man*’. It is easy for us to see that this is Jesus, because we know the truth – (you have the truth in your hands with your Bible open) but this was all new to Nicodemus. He had never been told in this manner before, in this way, by this Man. As a teacher of the scriptures – he was probably familiar with the term from Daniel 7:13 of the “Son of Man” – but I am sure that this thought of being “born again” had him a little rattled.

Jesus then tells Nicodemus that Moses lifted the pole up with the image of a snake on it in the wilderness (Numbers 21:8-9) because there had been snakes all over and people were getting bitten and were dying. God instructed Moses to build a pole with the image of a snake on it. I am not a fan of snakes! Even a picture of a snake gives me the willies. If you think of one of my favorite old movies – Indiana Jones, the first one, and he falls into the pit and he says, “snakes, why does it have to be snakes?” Some people have no problem with them, God instructed Moses to do something unique. He wasn’t making an idol – because his brother Aaron had already done that and got in trouble. Anyone who looked upon the image of the snake – not just a glance – but actually looking at it would be healed and live. Jesus was making the connection that the “Son of Man” had to be lifted up too, and as result, which we see in verse 15 on page 1651 *“that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him.”* I think you get the message here that being ‘lifted up’ – Jesus was lifted up on Good Friday, on Mount Calvary. And it wasn’t a snake on a pole – it was Our Lord – on a cross.

Something else is happening here. Nicodemus is about learn the identity of who this “Son of Man” is, and in fact, he will see that he is talking right to Him! The words that come next are some of the most famous in all of Scripture. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16) Right here Jesus sums up to Nicodemus and the whole world – that God’s invitation is not a closed club. It is not like the Coffee County Gun Club, where you have to have open to have an ID and a key. This is open to EVERYONE. You know it is funny, Marilyn and I have had a painting on our wall for many, many years and it is simply called ‘The Invitation.’ It is a man who is on his knees, looking up at Jesus. Behind Jesus is a golden room inside this doorway. All of these people inside are celebrating some kind of a banquet. Do you get where I am going with this? This man is on his knees looking up at Jesus, and he is pointing back at himself and saying “me?” “You want me to come in?” That is the kind of invitation we are talking about here. God’s invitation in John 3:16 is not just for you, or for you, or for you – but for everyone. Not just for St. Andrew’s - whether it is the Anglican St. Andrew’s or the Episcopal St. Andrew’s, or our brothers and sisters at First Baptist. NO – the whole world! All that they need do is one thing, and that is to BELIEVE and be saved by God through His Son. This is not an exclusive situation – but instead **this invitation is open to the entire world that God created and loves.** There are some people who reject this offer and decide to go their own way and do their own thing. It is kind of sad, but can you imagine how God feels? How would

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you feel if you went to someone's house and knocked on the door or rang their bell, because you wanted to tell them something very important, and they slammed the door in your face? Have you ever had that happen to you? It is not a lot of fun. This is what everyone who rejects Jesus does, over and over, and over again. But God still loves them! Can you imagine that?

While you still have your finger in the Pew Bible, let's see how God feels about this. Buckle up – it is about to get bumpy! Jesus continued, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to **save the world through him.***" (Now here is God's response to the door being slammed in His face) "***Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.***" (John 3:17-18)

I have just got to ask why we don't hear those words whenever we hear John 3:16? Our more progressive friends don't want to hear what 17 and 18 have to say. They are not very popular in the media either, and in many circles of industry or commerce – because you can't win customers if you are telling them that may be going someplace that is uncomfortable. These words of faith and truth make non-believers very uncomfortable. You might hear them say things like 'oh, how could a loving God not accept other beliefs or other religions?' Our answer to them should simply be – God loves you and He wants you to accept His invitation, it is that simple. You don't show up at a "Black tie formal" in your underwear, or in your shorts and a T-shirt! You accept the conditions of the invitation - or you don't go. Doesn't that make sense? That is what God is saying – accept the conditions of the invitation --- or don't!

Time for the turbulence: let's go a little further on page 1651 to verses 19-21. Jesus says, "*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.*" (John 3:19-21) This is the grace and forgiveness of God to those whose believe in Him, and the judgement for those reject Him.

Yesterday I was visiting with Ken Vickers, and we were talking about John 3:16-21 and he said, "thank you Lord, that I don't get what I deserve." He gets it; he understands. That is not just grace- that is mercy! Mercy is not getting what you deserve, and we all deserve hell, by the lives that we have lived. But Jesus, if we have accepted His invitation, says No, No, No, I have got a better idea. God the Father, when we stand in judgement, will say "sin?" "What sin?" Because Jesus' righteousness is being seen – and not our unrighteousness.

What Jesus said to Nicodemus are some very unpopular words – words that have caused some religious leaders to claim that there are other ways to the Father than Jesus. I feel that I must tell you that I believe every word that Jesus said to Nicodemus – words that many have swept under the rug because the Bible doesn't fit someone's agenda. You have heard me say many times from this pulpit that agendas and cultural changes should not dictate to the Bible – but

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we need to get back to where the Bible dictates to the agendas and culture to be in accord with the Word of God.

Jesus said in verse 14 of chapter 3 in John's Gospel – that the Son of Man must be 'lifted up' – and that "*everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.*" Nicodemus was so convinced of what Jesus told him - that he became a believer – and was there for Jesus at the very end of Jesus' earthly life. This is clear – Jesus' words say that if you believe in Jesus as Lord - He will be there at the end of your earthly life - to welcome you to His Kingdom. If you go to John chapter 19, Nicodemus brought a mixture of about seventy-five pounds of spices, with which to wrap Jesus' body with in the tomb. He helped Joseph of Arimathea to put Jesus in the tomb. You don't do that unless you believe in the one you are carrying there. Oh, and Joseph of Arimathea was also a leader in the Sanhedrin. He is two men who believed, and showed it, at the very end of Jesus' earthly life. Jesus wants to welcome you when you cross that bridge and we know that the Son of Man is THE "*way and the truth and the life*" (John 14:6) and no one comes to the Father but through Him!