

BORN FROM ABOVE

2 Lent – A March 8, 2020

John 3:1-17

In the midst of this season of repentance and reflection, we get a delivery of Good News. Certainly, that comes through in this morning's readings.

Genesis speaks about the great nation that will spring forth from Abraham: a nation that will be a blessing to the world, a theme that is echoed in the Letter to the Romans, where the writer reminds us that Abraham's righteousness was not something he worked to achieve, but rather came as God's gift. Abraham trusts God: that is, his eyes are ears are open to receive what God offers. That faith "is reckoned as righteousness." In the previous chapter of Romans there is a similar reference, quoted by Martin Luther: "...we hold that a person is justified by faith, apart from works of the law." [3:28]

John the Evangelist delivers "the gospel in a nutshell," as Luther called it, one of the most famous passages of Scripture which, just by reference (3:16), becomes shorthand for God's salvation story in Jesus.

Today is a day about Good News. The Prayer of the Day speaks of "new birth," a promise that played out in Jesus' words to Nicodemus—even if our nocturnal visitor couldn't quite grasp its meaning at the time. *Who among us can?* To say that someone is being "born again," or "born from above," confuses many modern-day followers: many think this is something we must do, rather than seeing this new birth as *God's work* on our behalf. It is Good News when we realize that it's not one more thing to add to our "to do" list.

Using the words "born from above" helps me to remember that *God is at work*. That's humbling and reassuring at the same time, because it's *not* all about me. That's good news for a world (or, picking up a theme from last week's gospel: the wilderness journey that we are on), where a lot of bad news comes at us. It's good news for any one of us who feels (at least, at times) like the weight of the world is on our shoulders. God, who calls and empowers me, also accompanies me. I don't have to fix the world all by myself. And that gives me hope to enter into the challenges that get thrown at me, rather than try to run away from them.

It sounds pretty easy. You know: "Let go...let God..." But sometimes that old, sinful self doesn't want to be bothered, inconvenienced, or (God forbid) have to change the way I live my life. It appears that, while our friend Nicodemus was curious to learn, he was also afraid to give up the power and prestige he had as a Pharisee. It is why he went to Jesus "by night," and why, later in John's gospel, when he suggests Jesus deserves a fair trial—will quickly acquiesce to the pressure of the other religious and political leaders.

Anna Carter Florence of Columbia Theological Seminary, wonders: "...*what might have been, if Nicodemus had acted on his first conversation with Jesus - if he'd not only recognized the light coming into the world but followed it, with his whole heart, let it change him and his world, and shared that light with his colleagues.*" Yet she admits: "*Nicodemus turns up in the life of every disciple, at some point.*" [day1.org for 03-08-20] We struggle with what new birth and new life mean for us, because they demand something new and something more from us. The Good News is that God is the actor. Day-by-day God is reshaping us so that we will be the hands and feet of God's unconditional love, acceptance, and solidarity with the world.

Fortunately, this portion of John's gospel ends with a promise: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." You see, condemnation was already all around. Just as we see much of it today. God became one-with-us, God-with-us, in order to confront the world's condemnation head-on. By becoming fully human, God made Godself vulnerable. Which led to death on the cross. That horrible sting of death.

But God promised healing for the world. So, echoing an Old Testament story of Moses lifting up a serpent on a pole in order to save the people from certain death, the Son of God is lifted up on a "pole" in order to redeem the world from the sting of death and eternal separation from God. So we lift high the cross.

God's plan, God's will, is all about the Good News that overcomes every evil. "For God so loved the world that he gave...." Amen.