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Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“All Grace. All Gift. All Jesus.”

Text: John 3:1-17 (Genesis 12:1-9; Romans 4:1-8, 13-17)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

It could be the start of a bad joke: a Pharisee, a Samaritan woman, a blind man, and a dead man walk into a bar . . .

But its not a joke. These are the four people we are going to meet this Lenten season, today and the next three Sundays. We’re going to hear their stories. Not of walking into a bar, but of walking into Jesus. We’re going to hear of their encounters with Him and how He changed their lives. And the first one, today, is the Pharisee. Nicodemus.

You just heard the story. How Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Perhaps he was afraid to come in the day; afraid of what his fellow Pharisees would think of him or say about him. They didn’t like Jesus very much, after all. But Nicodemus was curious, and maybe a bit confused. For his fellow Pharisees were saying that Jesus was a lawbreaker at best, and demon-possessed at worst, but Nicodemus saw the signs that Jesus was doing and knew: *no one could be doing these signs unless God was with him*. So he comes to Jesus at night, looking for some light.

But the conversation doesn’t get very far. Instead of clarity, Nicodemus just gets more confused. It’s like they’re using the same words but speaking different languages. You’ve been in conversations like that. You say one thing, but the person you’re talking to hears it in a very different way, with a very different meaning. That can be quite frustrating, as it was here, I think, for Nicodemus.

For Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, had been trained to think in a certain way: *to think of the kingdom of God in terms of himself and what he did*. Good works. Keeping the Law. Zealousness for always doing the right thing. Sabbath observance. Tithing. Washing. And because of this, the people looked up to the Pharisees. They were serious, they were godly, they were holy.

So what Jesus says doesn’t compute with him. He understands the words, but whatever Jesus says, Nicodemus hears as something that he must do. So: ***unless one is born again***, Jesus says. And Nicodemus wonders: *How can I do that? How can I do that?*

But Jesus is not trying to teach Nicodemus what to do. Jesus is speaking grace and gift. Jesus is speaking of birth, which (as you mothers out there well know) the baby really has nothing to do with! He is just pushed out into the world. The mother does all the work. And the baby, once out, just opens her eyes and begins to see. No more darkness. She sees her mother. She sees a whole new world.

That's what the kingdom of God is like, Jesus says. But gift language spoken to a Law mind confuses Nicodemus. *How can these things be?* he asks. Did he ask that defiantly, or despairingly? Mocking, or imploring? To argue, or on the verge of tears? For if what Jesus said was right . . . Jesus, who did signs no one could do unless God was with him . . . and Nicodemus couldn't do what He said . . . what did that mean for him? *Could Nicodemus see the kingdom of God? Could Nicodemus be saved?* He didn't know. He really didn't know . . .

Jesus knew this was a new way of thinking for him, as it is for us. We're used to thinking in earthly terms, worldly ways. Earning what you get and getting what you deserve. But heavenly thinking is quite different than that; this heavenly testimony that Jesus has come to bring. Not to confuse us, but to correct us. And as usual, what works better to do that is not just words, but pictures. Images. And so Jesus gives him an image of this: *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

As a Pharisee, Nicodemus knew that story well. In fact, he had probably first heard it as a child growing up, in Sunday School. How the people of Israel were being bitten by poisonous snakes in the wilderness, and were in great danger and desperation. So God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole, with the promise that whenever anyone had been bitten but then looked at the bronze snake, he would not die but live. It was a great story. *Was Jesus saying it was going to happen again?*

Well, we don't hear anymore from Nicodemus that night. I wonder if he lay awake in bed later that night, all these thoughts running again and again through his mind, robbing him of sleep. Trying to make sense of it all . . .

Until, one day, the light he was seeking that night finally came. When like that newborn baby, he opened his eyes and began to see. And what did he see? He saw what Jesus had told him about: **the Son of Man lifted up on the cross.**

We know Nicodemus was there, when Jesus was crucified. John tells us that he helped Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus down after he died and put him in the tomb. But *how long* had he been there? What did he see? What did he think? I wonder if, looking up at Jesus, those words Jesus had spoken went racing through his mind again . . . *How had God saved Israel? What was God doing now? And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have*

eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

It was almost like Jesus had planted those words there, in the womb of his mind, and now they had given birth. Nicodemus opened his eyes and could see for the very first time. That's what the kingdom of God is all about! God coming to us, not we to God. God saving us, not telling us what to do. God taking the poison of our sin, so that we could be saved. ***That whoever believes in him should not perish*** in the wilderness of this world and its sin, ***but have life. Eternal life.***

What Moses had done did happen again! Or, maybe better to say, what Moses had done was a picture, a foreshadowing, an image of the even greater work God was going to do later. The Exodus was great, but this exodus, led by Jesus, was even greater.

If that's what Nicodemus saw, Nicodemus had indeed been born again. But he hadn't done it. Jesus had done it.

And Jesus has done it for you. You who have been born of water and the Spirit in Holy Baptism. Jesus has planted His Word and Spirit into you to give you the eyes of faith to see. To see Jesus on the cross **for you**. To see your salvation. To see that it is not you who do the kingdom of God - the kingdom of God comes to you. It is not your work but His work. It is not your activity but His activity. You are passive. You are *born*. And then you live. You live the life you have been given. Life as a child of God.

But what if we don't? What if we don't live that life very well? What if we sin?

Well you know what? Not if. . . You will mess that life up. You will sin. Maybe spectacularly. We heard of Abraham in the first two readings today, and how the kingdom of God came to him as grace, as a gift. Not through works but through God's promise. Through Abraham being born again. And Abraham messed it up. He was afraid of the local kings and instead of trusting God and His promises, told Sarah to say she was his sister instead of his wife - and he did this not once, but twice! Later he got tired of waiting for God to fulfill His promise and decided to take matters into his own hands, and had a son with a maidservant instead of with his wife, Sarah.

So the kingdom of God coming to you and you being born again doesn't mean the end of sinning - it means the beginning of your forgiveness. Of the forgiveness Jesus won for you on the cross given to you by faith alone. Not faith *plus* what you do, but by faith alone. ***That whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.***

I like to think that's what happened to Nicodemus, though we're not told definitively.

And I think it interesting that just as Nicodemus had come to Jesus that first time at night, so when he saw *the Son of Man lifted up on the cross*, it was dark then, too. Not because it was night time, but because, we are told, the sun had stopped shining. But there, in that darkness (I like to think), Nicodemus saw the light he had been looking for all along.

And I don't think Nicodemus stopped doing what he had been doing before - his tithing and Sabbath observance and good works. He just did them in a new way, with a new freedom. Not to earn the kingdom of God, as an outsider trying to get in - but as a citizen of the kingdom; a son of God - an *insider* now able to bless others.

So you too. You citizens of the kingdom, born again into the kingdom by water and the Spirit, sons and daughters of God, you now live a new life with a new freedom, seeing and thinking in a new way. For *the Son of Man was lifted up on the cross* for you. To cure you of the poison of your sin with His forgiveness, and to feed you with the fruit from His tree - His very body and blood. That as a newborn child is fed by its mother, so you, too, be fed by the one who has given you new birth - your God and Saviour. That you look to Him for your life and for all that you need.

For the Son of Man was lifted up to throw the serpent down. Jesus was lifted up to lift you up. To lift you up from death to life. From relying on what you do (which leads only to death) to relying on what He did (which leads to life). That you be born again.

That's what Nicodemus learned. The best news of all. That when it comes to the kingdom of God . . . it's all grace. All gift. All Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.