

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S "A COMMUNITY OF HOPE"

Required for Entry Trinity Sunday June 7, 2009

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

John 3:1-17

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." 4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" 5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." 9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. 10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "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. 17 For

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Today is Trinity Sunday. By focusing on the Trinity, we sort of sum up God's work over the Church Year from Advent, the Father's preparing to send his Son into the world, through Christmas, when the Son becomes a human being, through Epiphany and Lent and Holy Week, when Jesus was crucified, through his resurrection at Easter, his Ascension, and last Sunday God's gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Each member of the Trinity worked in concert through all these events we commemorate through the Church Year, and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are at work in our gospel reading as well. This should be a familiar passage to us all. Nicodemus, a noted scholar and a member of the Jewish ruling council, is intrigued with Jesus. One night he pays Jesus a visit to try to find out a little bit about where Jesus is coming from and what his goals might be. Nicodemus is polite—maybe a little too polite. In order to be a council member, he has the equivalent of a Ph.D. in Old Testament, but in verse 2, he addresses this peasant carpenter from Galilee as a fellow rabbi: **"Rabbi,"** he says, **"we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."**

Whatever the response Nicodemus was looking for, I'm sure it wasn't the one Jesus gave him. He opens the conversation talking about Jesus and his credentials, but Jesus responds in verse 5 by stipulating what's required for entry into the kingdom of God: **"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."**

If you've ever traveled to a foreign country, you've had the experience of having to prepare for your trip. Depending on the country or countries you visit, you may need a visa. A visa is simply permission from one country to allow a citizen of another country to enter. Belize, for example, where St. Matthew's often goes on mission trips, doesn't require U.S. citizens to have a visa for visits up to 30 days. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, however, requires a visa for entry into the country for any purpose. Among other things, governments use visas to control who gets into their country and who doesn't. Jesus tells Nicodemus and us, what's required for entry into the kingdom of God: being "born again" or "born from above"—the Greek can mean either. The point is we can't get into the kingdom of God without a wholesale transformation of our nature and identity.

Nicodemus is a very learned man, and yet he's completely baffled. He's fishing for Jesus to give him some information about himself, and instead he gets entry requirements for the kingdom of God. He mutters something about it being impossible to go back into your mother's womb and get a do-over on your birth process. He's right, of course. Even if it were possible for an adult to start life over as a newborn infant, I'd be no better off. I'd be the same person. Oh, I like to think I'd live my life differently and make better choices, but I know myself well enough to know better. I'd be like Bill Murray in the movie "Groundhog Day," doing the same dumb, sinful things all over again.

The new birth Jesus is describing completely transforms a person from a sinner into a child of God. That's what's required for entry. The kingdom of God is not a country or a kingdom that requires a visa for entry. It is the spiritual realm where God's will is perfectly carried out. Nicodemus knew all about it from the Scriptures. It's the blessed future of the world that God will bring on the Last Day. In God's kingdom, wars will cease, animals will stop their predatory behavior, there will be no more death or poverty or oppression or grief. But these evils that will be abolished are only symptoms of human sin, and the remedy that cures them is the person of God himself, **"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."** (Habakkuk 2:14)

God is the Father of the kingdom. He has appointed his Son as king, and he is populating his kingdom with men and women and boys and girls whom he makes his children by giving them a new birth in the Spirit through their faith in his Son. New birth, birth from above is required for entry into the kingdom of God because it is the kingdom of *God*. God's kingdom is where God's will is perfectly done. In our natural state, the way we are born into this world, human beings can't ever perfectly accomplish God's will. Some of us do better than others, and many do much better than I. Left to ourselves, we simply don't have what's required for entry.

But God has not left us to ourselves. Out of his heart of love for humanity, he has sent his Son into the world to remake human beings into his children. Jesus Christ lived the sinless life of the kingdom of God and is alive today in those who come to him in faith. As he says in verses 16 and 17, **"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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."** He saves those who have faith in his death for their sins on the cross. They turn to him as he was lifted up on the cross to die for our sins, **"as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert"**. Jesus is referring to the 21st chapter of Numbers, where the Israelites were being attacked by poisonous

snakes. God promised Moses that every person who looked at a bronze image of a snake Moses was to fix on a high pole would be healed—and they were.

From his heart of love, God the Father populates his eternal kingdom by giving new birth through God the Spirit to those who come to him by faith in the life, death, and resurrection of God the Son, Jesus. Christ's death wipes away our sins day by day and moment by moment as we confess our need for him. **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9 NIV)**

God the Holy Spirit fills us and lives God's life in us. We're not left to ourselves in ourselves—God is in here with us! As Paul says in today's reading from Romans, ¹³ **“For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, ¹⁴ because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”** How do we do this? Paul gives us some help in Ephesians 4:22-24: **“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”** When we are born again, we get a new self, but our old self is still around. It's the part of us that if it weren't restrained by our new self would run off the cliff chasing the deceitful desires that promise security and peace and satisfaction, but only bring misery and death. But the new self God the Father gives us in our rebirth through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is continually growing as we live according to the Scriptures in communion with the Lord. It's the self that's created to be like God because it's from God. It's God's image restored and growing in us.

When we come to God through faith in Christ and what he has done, we become citizens of the kingdom of God through new birth. We become children of God the Father, who from his heart of love sent his Son so that we might become his children through the Holy Spirit living in us. There's no visa required. Instead, Jesus tells us in John 3:7 **“You must be born again.”**

Now many of us here today have experienced the new birth, the birth from above that is God's entry requirement for the kingdom of God. Or maybe you've heard about it and are confused, or think it's a fad or some peculiar brand of Christianity. You know, the “born again Christian.” But that's really a redundant term. There is no other kind of Christian. Jesus himself tells us, “You must be born again.”

I'm going to give us all the opportunity to affirm our faith in Jesus Christ and receive the new birth the birth from above, that Jesus promises in the Scriptures. I'm going to pray a brief prayer of confession of sin and commitment to Christ and allow you to repeat it silently to God, and receive from him what he has for you. And after you've received him, come to the Lord's table this morning with joy and gratitude for what he has done for us.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, I come to you this morning as a sinner in need of your new birth. Forgive me for the things I've done which offend you and have hurt other people. Thank you, Lord Jesus for dying for my sins and forgiving me. Fill me with your Holy Spirit and the new and eternal life you promise. Help me by your power to live each day as your child. Amen.