

The Holy Trinity, 5.30.2021

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Isaiah 6:1-8, 21-26; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

“Here am I, send me”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16 is one of the most widely known verses in the Bible. This verse tells us a lot about who God is.

God is love, and God loves all people. God is a sending God. God sends Jesus, the Son, so that we might know eternal life. The loving and sending nature of God is clearly seen in today’s reading from Isaiah where God forgives the prophet, and asks, “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” Isaiah responded to God’s sending love, “*Here am I, send me.*”

It is God’s nature to love the world. It is God’s nature to go out into the world, sending the Son, Jesus. Today on Holy Trinity Sunday, we remember that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We remember that we only know the Triune God through Jesus, who calls himself the Son, who points to God the Father, and who promises to send the Holy Spirit. In John 3:16 Jesus tells us that God loved the world so much that God sent the Son into the world.

Yet imagine if we did not have Jesus to tell us about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The sending of Jesus isn’t only about gaining eternal life; it is also about coming to know God. In Jesus, we know God. Through knowing Jesus we begin to experience eternal life, and we become part of the family of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is the name into which we have been baptized. The Trinity is not simply a diagram or a theological abstraction to be figured out and mastered, like a mathematics equation. The word “Trinity” is simply a word that describes the God whom Jesus points to in the gospels. The word “Trinity” itself is, of course, not in the Bible. The triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is revealed by Jesus, who invites all people to believe in him.

The Holy Trinity is a sending God. The Father sent the Son into the world that whoever believes in him might have eternal life. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son. The sending nature of God is who God is. God loves this world, and sends the Son, Jesus, who sends the Holy Spirit, so that we might be reborn in the Spirit – so that we might be sent into the world as witnesses to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are baptized in this name and sent into the world as God’s beloved children.

Christian baptism is unique because we baptize in the name of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This means that every baptism is also a sending. Just as Jesus was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, to rely upon God’s word, so too, we should not be surprised that the Triune God sends the beloved baptized into the world. The Spirit moves, drives, and leads us throughout our lifetimes. God asks, “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” In response the baptized cry, “*Abba! Father!*” – “*Here am I, send me!*” The Holy Trinity is the God who loves, sends and leads us throughout our lifetimes.

The Triune God must have been at work in the life of a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jewish people, came to Jesus at night seeking answers from God’s Son. Though Nicodemus did not perhaps fully realize it, the Holy Spirit was nudging him into a new relationship with God through the Son, Jesus.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which literally means he was “separated” – meaning he lived separated from ordinary people so that he could live out the Jewish law. Nicodemus was also a leader of the Jewish people. The word “leader” comes from the Greek word ἄρχων (*archón*), which means that Nicodemus was also a member of the Sanhedrin, a committee of seventy members and the supreme court of Israel. The Holy Spirit was nudging this powerful person to seek out God’s Son, Jesus.

We can also imagine that Nicodemus was probably a somewhat wealthy man. After Jesus’ death, Nicodemus accompanied Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb, bringing over 100 pounds of aloes and spices to prepare Jesus’ body for burial. Access to such costly goods, and in such a brief amount of time, indicates not only his wealth and influence, but that Nicodemus had been changed by his encounter with Jesus. At the end of John’s gospel, we see Nicodemus beginning to walk in the light of faith. He no longer walked in the darkness of night, afraid of being seen as a friend of Jesus. The time spent with Jesus had changed Nicodemus forever.

So Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus at night. Nicodemus began to speak to Jesus respectfully, praising and almost flattering Jesus, saying, “*no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*” Jesus’ reply immediately deepened the conversation by asking Nicodemus, not about scripture or the laws, but about his own experience of the Holy Spirit and his life in the kingdom of God. Jesus was not concerned about receiving praise from Nicodemus; rather, Jesus was concerned about Nicodemus’ own experience of the saving presence of God.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus directly, “*No one can see the kingdom of God without having been*

*born from above.*” Jesus wasn’t concerned about Nicodemus’ knowledge of scripture and his book learning; rather, Jesus was concerned that Nicodemus knew the living presence of God. This is more than simply knowing the Bible, or knowing the Mosaic Law as a Pharisee. Jesus was asking if Nicodemus had experienced the life giving Spirit of God who gives life to and creates everything – the cosmos, the world, and every person. *“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

Jesus’ words about being born “from above” have a dual meaning. The Greek word translated as “from above,” *anothén*, means two things: First, it means “again” or “anew,” and second, it means “from above” or “from heaven.” So Jesus was telling Nicodemus that seeing the kingdom of God comes from being “born anew from above.”

Of course, Nicodemus famously misunderstood Jesus’ words about spiritual rebirth to mean only, “born again” - as in experiencing a second biological birth. It was a crude and literal misunderstanding that must have made Jesus, shake his head in disbelief, because eventually Jesus asked Nicodemus, *“Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”*

The rebirth that Jesus was speaking of is a spiritual rebirth that happens through water and the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

It was clear that Nicodemus had a lot of book learning, but did not yet know about life in God with the Holy Spirit. We might say Nicodemus did not know the difference between knowledge about God and faith in God. Faith, or believing, is what leads to eternal life. Believing is another way of knowing. Faith in Jesus is another way to knowledge. Faith in Jesus leads to new life, to being born from above.

Today on Holy Trinity Sunday we remind ourselves that following God isn’t really about being part of a certain group or denomination. It isn’t about being Lutheran, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist or Methodist, it is about being alive to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which was an identity, like a denomination, that he could point to for assurance. It distinguished him from the Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection. Nicodemus was like many of us who lean on our denominational identity, rather than leaning upon Jesus, as the one who points us toward the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus told Nicodemus, *“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,*

*but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” Those words must have stayed with Nicodemus. Nicodemus had sat in the presence of Jesus, the Son who saves the world. He must have realized that it wasn’t his identity as a Pharisee, or his knowledge of the Law that was going to save him. Rather, only faith in the Son, Jesus, would lead him to eternal life. Do you sit in the presence of Jesus each day? Do you take your questions and fears to Jesus in prayer when you are woken during the night? Do you walk with him rejoicing in the light of day?

Of course, Jesus’ words about being born of water and the Spirit prefigure Holy Baptism. For Martin Luther, baptism meant water and the Word of God. Baptism is a rebirth through water and God’s life giving Word. Baptism is what God does for humanity, offering new birth in the Spirit. Through Holy Baptism we are reborn children of God, who cry, “*Abba, Father!*” We become, as Paul writes, children of God, “*and if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.*” To be born of water and the Spirit, baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – is to be born anew, from above.

We are baptized only once, and over a lifetime we continue to grow into our baptisms as children of God and heirs with Christ. Each day we walk in the light of God, already knowing eternal life. As Luther liked to say, in baptism we put on the garment of Christ, and it is a garment that we wear for a lifetime, never outgrowing it, nor ever wearing it out. Baptism is the garment that covers our sin with the righteousness of Christ.

Nicodemus had begun to understand this. His nighttime meeting with Jesus deepened his faith in God. We don’t know what happened to Nicodemus after he leaves the stage in the Gospel of John. I am certain, however, that he walked in the light of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, because he knew Jesus.

Like Nicodemus, do you sit in the presence of Jesus in prayer? Do you walk with Jesus on your human journey? In faith over a lifetime, how are you growing into your baptism? Do you cry out, “*Abba! Father!*” Does your faith in Jesus assure your identity as a child of God and heir with Christ? Over a lifetime, God comes to each of us, asking, “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” How do you answer God’s invitation?

Only through Jesus do we know these words: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*”

God asks each of us: “*Whom shall I send?*” Trusting in Jesus, we reply with joy, “*Here am I; send me!*” Amen.