



Trinity Sunday

May 30, 2021

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude: "Trinity Song"

S. McCracken

Gathering

Welcome and Lighting the Christ Candle

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* Call to Worship

Liturgist: Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name.
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.

All: **The voice of the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful and majestic.
The voice of the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.**

Liturgist: The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning, twists the oaks and strips the forests bare.

All: **And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"**

Psalm 29:1-9 adapted

All Singing: 538 "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty
Singing verses 1, 3, and 4

God's Greeting

Minister: The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord is enthroned as King forever.
The Lord gives strength to his people and blesses them with peace.
In the name of the Triune God: Creator, Christ, and Comforter.
Psalm 29:10-11 adapted

All: Amen.

God's People Greeting One Another

Children ages 4–7 may come forward for a blessing before they leave for “Children in Worship.”

Children's Blessing

Children: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also, with you.

Reconciliation

Liturgist: In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord seated on the throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings and they were calling to one another:

All: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.

Liturgist: At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke, and Isaiah cried:

All: Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Almighty.

Silent Confession and Reflection

All Singing: 13 “Have Mercy on Us, God Most High”

Liturgist: Then one of the seraphs flew to Isaiah with a live coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar. With it he touched Isaiah's mouth and said,

All: See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.
Isaiah 6:1-7 adapted

* **All Singing: 682 Before the Throne of God Above**

Liturgist: Romans 8:12-17

Proclamation

Prayer for Illumination

All Singing: 749 “Spirit of the Living God”

Scripture: John 3:1-17

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: Patron Saint of Seekers

* **All Singing: 674 “As Moses Raised the Serpent Up”**

Dedication

Prayers of the People

* **All Singing: 965 “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow”**

Sending

* Benediction

Postlude: “O Love How Deep, How Broad, How High” David Johnson

Worship Leaders

Organist: Dora Diephouse
Pianist / Vocalist: Erin Pacheco
Vocalist: Ginny Carpenter
Cello: Adeline Larsen
Violinist: Frances Boerman-Cornell
Djembe: Clay Carlson
Trumpeter: Don Kosmal
Minister: Roger Nelson

9:00 AM Service

Liturgist: Sarah Rinkenberger
Prayer: Yudha Thianto

10:15 AM Service

Acolyte: Lydia Carlson
Liturgist: Jeff Carpenter
Prayer: Gary R. Medema

Hymns are from *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)
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Text: John 3: 1-17
Title: Patron Saint of Seekers
Date: 05.30.21
Roger Allen Nelson

I have two dear friends who have left the church in search of God.

Both are pastors. One took an early retirement because he's convinced that the Spirit is active outside of the church and not inside. He's seeking after God in desert retreats, solo hikes, and working with a spiritual director. The other resigned his pastorate to invest the nexus of psychedelic drugs and spirituality. There is a great deal of research being done about how psilocybin can help in healing trauma and be part of a movement to spiritual clarity. He's working at that intersection.

You may be thinking I should find better friends, but both are remarkably good and gifted pastors, neither has forsaken the faith, and they're not alone in their search for God. "Spiritual but not religious" continues to be the fastest growing faith demographic in America and a recent study suggests that these folks are working with four essential questions:

the nature of the divine,
the nature of humanity,
the role of community,
and the experience of the afterlife.

In looking for answers to these questions they cobble together a kind of spirituality – even as they continue to ask questions, continue to seek, continue to search for God.

Dear friends, I like to think of Nicodemus as their patron saint.

Something made this respected religious scholar, who had been to the best schools and studied with the best professors, go looking for Jesus. Men of his stature usually didn't lurk around at night but some question kept him tossing and turning until he pulled a coat over his nightclothes, threw back a shot of courage, and snuck out of the house.

Nicodemus slipped through the moonlit shadows of Jerusalem to find Jesus.

He was seeking answers.

He was looking for some peace.

He was searching for God.

Most scholars think that Nicodemus went at night because he was a coward. Jesus had made a mess of things in the temple, was stirring up the commoners, and was a threat to the ruling elite. There'd be hell to pay if Nicodemus was caught cavorting with this rabble-rousing-rabbi, so he went at night. That's scholarly opinion. But I wonder if Nicodemus went to Jesus because he's one of us.

Maybe you came to church this morning hoping, seeking, longing for connection to God. Maybe, even as you juggle bills and manage life's expectations, you're also struggling with your own doubts and demons. Maybe you're befuddled by Jesus and wonder why faith seems to work for others but not for you. Maybe you have a restless spirit and the contemporary American church

experience leaves you longing for more. Maybe Nicodemus wasn't a coward but was one of us – one of those seeking answers and searching for God.

Which is why it seems worth noting that the second chapter of John's gospel ends this way:

For he knew what was in people (anthropo)

And chapter three begins with:

Now there was a person (anthropos)

Nicodemus is an example of what's in people. The text reads this way:

Many believed in his name because they saw the signs/miracles which he was doing. But Jesus, himself, did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and had no need for anyone to testify to him about a person, for he knew what was in people. Now there was a person...

John sets up Nicodemus as a picture of what it means to be human. And, Nicodemus knew enough about Jesus to be curious, or unsettled, or moved by some deep longing to get up and knock on the door:

Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs/miracles you are doing if God were not with him.

That's not a bad confession of faith in the middle of the night.

It certainly isn't negative, challenging, or misguided. It seems to follow from what the gospels portray. Jesus is a gifted teacher and healer who came from God, but there must be something more than faith in the miraculous or the extraordinary. There must be something more....

In response Jesus launches into this wordy-mysterious-answer about being born again, and born from above, and born of water and Spirit. And Nicodemus is rightly flustered. He's trying to figure out who Jesus is and Jesus answers with slippery words that sound like riddles. The last thing that Nicodemus says is, "How can this be?" Not really a ringing endorsement. I'm not sure that he stopped searching....

But, let me draw your attention to one odd little line.

Jesus says:

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.

Jesus uses here an obscure idiom called "the prophetic past tense." He speaks of a future event as if it already happened. Jesus speaks of something coming with the confidence of something past.

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.

Jesus offers a sort of bookends to his life.

I came down from God. I am going back to God.

I descended from God. I am ascending to God.

While Jesus doesn't claim here to be of the same substance as God, he does suggest a relationship that is different than just being a teacher or a prophet. He positions himself as a kind of singular lynch pin between heaven and earth, between God and humanity.

F. Dale Bruner puts it this way:

If anyone wants sure commerce with the true God, Jesus is the sole authorized route.....Do you want clear knowledge of God in heaven? Listen to this Jesus on earth..... Do you want to go to God? Follow Jesus ~ he is the only one who has been there and knows the way back there. Let us not try to go up there by ourselves or by anyone else's instructions. Do not expect other heavenly visitations. Do not look for any heaven sent or heaven sending transportations. The space between God and human beings is filled by one person exclusively: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man and the One-and-Only Son of God, the sole mediator between God and human beings.

Big gulp!

That exclusive claim is enough to keep you up for nights without end.

In a multi-cultural, wonderfully-complex-diverse world,
in a world with multiple expressions and experiences of the divine,
in a world that is spiritual and religious,
to claim that Jesus is the only one who knows the way to and from God is what makes Christianity appealing and universal and beautiful.

And it is what makes Christianity restrictive and exclusive and maddening. Some of you heard that quote and breathed a sigh of deep confidence and some of you winced and squirmed in your seats...

But! But, buried in that little line is the astonishing mystery that when we couldn't or wouldn't come to God, when we demonstrated time and time again that we were powerless to make our way back to God, when the night was too dark and the search was too long, God came to us.

God sent not just a teacher but God sent God's self. God sent his Son – he knew the way to earth and he knew the way back to heaven. Amidst all that language about being born again or born from above, the essential claim, it seems to me, is that God sent his Son to earth.

Now. You can believe in that. You can doubt it. You can rest in it. You can live out of it or lean into it. You can trust it. You can be completely befuddled by it. You can push against it. You can hope in it. You can take comfort in it. You can deny it. You can cling to it. You can run from it. You can stay awake and wrestle with it. You can keep searching in it.

You may do all of those things at some time in your life. (I have.)
You may hold all of those things simultaneously. (I do.)
But, I am not sure that what you do with it matters all that much.
For the gospel is that:

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

And that means that the motion, the blowing wind, the birthing belongs to God. How we respond is some mix of experience, disposition, understanding, will, timing, culture, mystery, and divine initiative, but the action is God toward us.

Dear friends, we are all Nicodemus.

We all at some point ask, "How can this be?"

How can this be that God would send his Son toward me?

How can this be that I'm still searching and struggling?

How can this be that a God who loves me would let this abuse continue? How can this be that the followers of Jesus oppress and demean others?

How can this be that I'm still dealing with these same issues in my sixties?

How can this be?

Nicodemus is an example of what it means to be human.

There's no mention of what happened with Nicodemus that night. There is no record of what he thought as he walked back home in the dark. In fact, Nicodemus doesn't appear again until he assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial. He brings the spices with which they anoint the body. He helps wrap the body in linen and lay it to rest.

Those are the gentle and generous things that we do for those whom we love. I like to think that Nicodemus came to love Jesus. Maybe on that searching-sleepless night Nicodemus learned that Jesus loved him first.

Dear friends, no matter what you're seeking, no matter your journey....

You are loved by God in Jesus.

Jesus came from God.

Jesus knows that way back to God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.