

ROMANS 8:12-17 (p. 916)

MAY 30, 2021

JOHN 3:1-19 (p. 862)

BLAINE

TRINITY SUNDAY/MEMORIAL DAY

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

You welcome little children Lord, with open arms. And you have told us that whoever becomes as humble as a child will be considered great in your Kingdom. So please Lord, cause us to be your humble children. Teach us to trust you with a child-like faith. Enable us to learn from your Word with eager minds. And soften our harden-hearts Father, please, so that we might joyfully receive Grace from your own hand. We ask these things in Jesus' Name, Amen.

“BORN AGAIN”

Once, a little boy asked, “Where is God”? And his mother replied, “Eat your lunch”. So, he did. And he grew older. ...Then he asked a teacher, “Where is God”? And the teacher said, “Do your homework”. So, he did. And he grew older. ...Then he asked a Pastor, “Where is God”? And the Pastor said, “Go to Church”. So, he did. And he grew older. ...He ate his lunches. ...He did his homework. ...He went to Church. ...He grew older. And pretty soon he didn't ask, “Where is God”, anymore!

Have you ever been that little boy? Or have you ever met that little boy! Have you wondered, “Where is God?” or “Who is God?” or “What is God really like?” only to have those heart-felt questions brushed aside, as if they didn't matter at all? Or have you ever been on the opposite side of that? Have you ever been Nicodemus, convinced that you knew all those answers, only to then, be surprised?

Today is Trinity Sunday, and the Church, across Denominational lines, encounters the Mystery of God face-to-face! We look at “God in Three Persons,” “One God in three separate manifestations”, what the Scholars call “Trinitarian Monotheism”! “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” “three distinct, yet unified, interactive, relational, and loving ways in which God is One”! So, have you got it? Is it clear?

“In the beginning was the Word,” right! That’s how John opens his Gospel. “And the Word was with God,” he says, “and the Word was God”! “Through Him all things were made”! Then, a little later, John tells us that “Word became flesh and dwelt among us”! He goes on to say Jesus is the “Light of the world”, a Light that “Shines into the Darkness”! But unfortunately, most people prefer “the Darkness! So, is it clear?

Do you think of Genesis when you think of God? You know, way back in the very beginning? I mean, that’s actually the birthplace of Trinitarian Theology! Not only was “The Word with God”, there in the beginning, but that “Word was God”! And “in the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth”! And by-the-way, the “Spirit of God hovered over the waters at Creation, remember? God spoke a Creative Word, and life came into being! Later, that Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, bringing Light into the Darkness! Still later, at Pentecost, which we talked about last week, the Spirit of God, the “Ruach Elohim”, exploded on the Believers in a most dramatic way! It’s simple, right? Trinitarian Theology! Creator! Redeemer! Sustainer! God above us! God among us! God within our hearts! We all, instantly understand! But maybe not? Maybe some of us are coming to Jesus in the dark, like Nicodemus, wanting to ask questions?

I have to tell you I really like Nicodemus! I do! He makes me feel as if it's okay to have questions! Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish Ruling Counsel. It says so right in the text! And the Pharisaic School of Judaism dates back to the mid-second Century B.C., with the expressed purpose of being the "Keepers the Faith"! Their "Mission Statement", if they have one, would be to hold onto the things of God, and pass them on intact! To maintain all the Religious Traditions, in all the right ways!

Nicodemus was a Rabbi too, a Religious Teacher, and therefore an expert in God's Law! And as a member of the Ruling Council in Jerusalem, he is politically connected as well! He has quite the Bio, don't you think! Nicodemus has status, and power, and authority! He is well-educated! Smart as Whip! And yet he comes to Jesus in the dark, asking questions.

Nicodemus knows God! Or at least, he thinks he does. At a minimum, he knows a lot about God! He knows about Creation, about the Garden, and the Flood. He knows about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, about Pharaoh and the Red Sea and the Exodus! He knows about the Nation of Israel, and the little boy David, the Giant Killer, who later became King! Nicodemus has studied the Law and the Prophets all of his life! He knows about Isaiah and Jeremiah and Elijah, about all the Judges, about Hezekiah and Habakkuk, Obadiah and Nahum, things we're not even familiar with! And apparently, he knows something about Jesus too! "Rabbi," he says "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him".

Nicodemus is convinced that Jesus has come from God. Don't miss that! The miraculous things Jesus has done testify to that! Nicodemus even has faith in Jesus, at least to some degree. Otherwise, he never would have approached Him in the first place, let alone ask Him questions! And Nicodemus has obviously discussed all these things with others as well, prior to this encounter, presumably with the other religious leaders, because the first thing he says is, "we"! "We know that you come from God!"

Nicodemus understands Religion, right! He has Faith in Jesus! He believes that Jesus has come from God! He is right where a lot of people are in the world today! Only that's apparently not enough! He is still in the dark, isn't he! And the first thing that Jesus says to him is, "in order to see the Kingdom of God you must be Born Again".

Now I know some of you readily agree with that! But be honest, how many of you jumped, or at the least squirmed? What I'm asking is, can you relate to Nicodemus? Is your head nodding "yes" right now, because you know? Or is it "spinning", because you don't?

Did you notice all of the symbolism in the text? Darkness and Light, Flesh and Spirit, Heaven and Earth! Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night! Jesus talking about being Born Again, or Born from Above, Born of Water and Spirit! Being Lifted Up! Jesus pointing to Eternal Life! He talks about Evil, and Truth, and Believing! So, is all that, Crystal Clear?

Because whenever I read this text, I wonder if Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he didn't want anyone else to know he had questions! That's kind of common, you know. People are sometimes embarrassed to admit that they are still seeking the Truth. Some are worried that even after all this time, and all this education, they still don't have all the answers! Maybe you can relate? I know I can! Nicodemus has a reputation to maintain, right? As part of the Religious Community, he needs to uphold his image! What would people think if they knew he didn't completely understand all the things of God? What would happen?

And yet he comes to Jesus anyway. And he acknowledges the Wonders that Jesus has done. And then, he starts asking questions, which is always a good way to learn! "Rabbi, we know that 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." That translates, at least in my mind to "You are pretty awesome Jesus! That's clear! But who are you? Tell me, please! Are you a Prophet, like Elijah or Isaiah or Jeremiah? Has God sent you to bring us a Word? Have you come to teach us, like Moses maybe—or to lead us, like David or John the Baptist?"

"Your preaching is powerful and articulate! Your theological discourse is well thought-out! The advice that you give to hurting people is immensely helpful in overcoming the hardships of life! My colleagues and I all agree! God has obviously gifted you with wisdom and compassion and discernment! Empowered you to perform Miracles and Wonders and Signs! You are brilliant! I like what I see! You might even be the best Role Model ever!

And when you think about, isn't Nicodemus in the exact same place that many are today? How many people do you know who believe that Jesus was an Enlightened Teacher? Or how many Christians can you name who emphasize that He cared about the poor and marginalized of society—that He preached justice and compassion—that He turned the other cheek? How many Believers even, see Jesus as a Miracle Worker—someone with a cure for what ails them, someone who can make great things happen in their lives? How many people have you met that see Jesus as a wonderful example—as a man of peace and humility, who didn't even cry out when they nailed Him to the Cross—a man who always acted in such godly ways! Obviously, you come from God, Jesus! We all know it!

Again, that “Belief Stance” is pretty common! The Koran, the Holy Book of Islam, describes Jesus as one of the greatest Prophets of all time! Those who follow the Far Eastern religion of Shinto acknowledge that Jesus was an Enlightened Spirit, what they call a Kami! Some Buddhists, even, truly believe that Jesus was one of the many reincarnations of Buddha himself!

All kinds of people, in all kinds of places, see Jesus as a Great Man, a Wonderful Teacher or Role Model, a man who has come from God! Which is exactly where Nicodemus is currently standing! But there is a problem with that! That's not what Jesus says about himself! “The Father and I are one”. “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father”. “I am the way, the truth, and the life?” “No one comes to the Father except through Me!” And now today, “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”!

Biblical Christianity is actually quite clear, isn't it! Jesus is God! And that, what we call Trinitarian Theology, is a stumbling block for many! As Christians, we acknowledge that God is unfathomable, beyond the reach of our human thinking and perceiving! "No one has ever seen God," we are told in 1 John 4:12. We simply do not completely understand all the things of God!

But as Believers, we also profess that Jesus Christ is the full, perfect, sufficient revelation of who God is, and what God does! Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, and therefore, what we believe about God flows from what we've seen of God in Jesus Christ! In His life, and death, and resurrection, we have seen as much of God as we ever hope to see this side of Heaven! And that's a problem for some, especially since Jesus is kind of demanding!

It is a whole lot easier to keep God generic and abstract, to make God vague or distant or blurry! Because if that's the case, then we can shape God into anything we want Him to be! Something "spiritual" maybe, that we can take out of our pocket, rub the Bottle, and out pops the Genie! Like some Benevolent Being riding on the clouds, who resembles Santa Claus a bit, giving good girls and boys, everything they need!

You see, if God is unclear, then He never actually needs to get around to doing anything! Or saying anything! Let alone commanding anything! And us post-modern thinkers then, can just sort of design our world as if "we" are actually in control! Everything functions rather nicely that way, don't you think!

Natural Law governs everything, right! And “we,” with our “technological wonders” have discovered how everything works! Or soon will! Who wants a God that interferes with that? Be honest! Don’t most people want a minimalist God, one who sits back and does nothing? Or a philosophical God, the God of Deism, who is detached and inactive, or at a minimum, non-invasive? It’s the Absent Watch-Maker Theory! Sure, God made us! But now, we are on our own! That’s about as much God as most people can handle!

The problem is, the only way to achieve that, is to somehow separate this intrusive Jesus Fellow out of the Trinity, out of the Godhead, out of history, out of Prophecy, which is exactly what so many try to do! “I’m not very religious, you know. But I am “spiritual”! “I believe in God. Isn’t that all it takes?”

One of my all-time favorite quotes, which I’m sure I’ve shared with you often, addresses that very belief far better than I ever could! It’s from C. S. Lewis’ “Mere Christianity”.

“I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him; ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man, and said the sort of things Jesus said, would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell! You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman, or something worse!”

“You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God! But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

It's true! Jesus cannot be just a Great Teacher, or an Ethical Example, or a moral Role Model even! He is either confused, or crazy, in which case you certainly do not want to follow Him! Or He is who He says He is, God incarnate, the second part of the Trinity! And if that's the case, which it clearly is in Scripture, then you need to obey Him! I mean, He is God, right! You can't ignore Him! We either need to reject Him as a lunatic, and avoid Him like the plague, or take Him at His Word! It really is that simple! And the ability to see that Truth comes as a gift from God we're told, through Grace, by the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity!

In the dark, with questions, Nicodemus comes to Jesus. And Jesus says, “I tell you the Truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is ‘Born Again’”! The Greek word translated here as “again” is *anōthen*. It's a rather ambiguous word that can also mean “from above”. Scholars have argued over the interpretation for years! But what if Jesus is intentionally using it as a double entendre! You know, you need both, a brand-new beginning, one empowered “from above”! You need to enter into new life, be born of water, baptism, your choice—as well as the Spirit, God's Power! You need to be born again, from above!

Peter makes a similar statement in 1 Peter 1:23. He tells Believers to live Holy Lives, to make a Fresh Start! It's the same thing that Paul is saying in our reading from Romans this morning too. Now that you are in Christ—through the Power of the Holy Spirit, with the Presence of the Holy Spirit in your heart, since you are now in a right relationship with Almighty God—act like it! Change things! Start anew! Honor the Spirit of God who lives within you! It's your choice! But it's God's Power!

That Spirit, by-the-way, the one in your heart, the “Ruach Elohim”, is same Spirit that hovered over the waters at Creation! It's the same Spirit that came to rest on Jesus at His Baptism, the Spirit of Holiness, the “Ruach ha-Kodesh”! It is the same Spirit that Jesus promised to the Believers in the Upper Room, accompanied by the very same command as well! “If you love me,” Jesus says in John 14:15 “keep my commands!” If you do that, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth”! Trinitarian Theology doesn't get much simpler than that!

Kyle Idleman, in his book, “Not a Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus”, seems to agree, and even expands on my thinking. He says, “Nicodemus came at night (so) no one would see him. At night he would avoid awkward questions from the other religious leaders. At night he could spend time with Jesus without anyone knowing. If he could speak with Jesus at night, when no one was around, maybe he could begin a relationship with Jesus without having to make any real changes! He could follow Jesus without it impacting his job. In fact, his friends and family wouldn't even have to know.”

“He could talk to Jesus at night, and quietly make a decision in his heart to believe in Jesus; that way it wouldn’t disrupt his comfortable and established life. Here is the reality that Nicodemus is about ready to have impressed on him though: There is no way to follow Jesus without Him interfering with your life! Following Jesus will cost you something! Following Jesus will always cost you something!”

A bit later in the book, Idleman says, “Most of us don’t mind Jesus making some minor change in our lives, but Jesus wants to turn our lives upside down! Fans don’t mind Him doing a little touch up work, but Jesus wants a complete renovation! Fans come to Jesus, thinking tune up, but Jesus is thinking overhaul! Fans think a little makeup is fine, but Jesus is thinking makeover! Fans think a little decorating is required, but Jesus wants a complete remodel! Fans want Jesus to inspire them, but Jesus wants to interfere with their lives!”

Yeah, Jesus is kind of demanding when you actually listen to what He says! And that pesky Holy Spirit living in your heart nudging you to do things, or not do things, can be just as intrusive! But tell me, if that’s God’s Word, then what choice do you really have? Nicodemus eventually got that! He even came to the point where he defending Jesus publically, in front of the Great Sanhedrin! And after the Crucifixion, we see Nicodemus helping Joseph of Arimathea wrap Jesus’ body for burial! Nicodemus eventually got it! He came to Jesus in the dark, asking questions about God! He came with an open heart, ready to hear the Truth! And he got answers, from above, through the Holy Spirit! Maybe there is a lesson in that for us? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, it feels so good to spend this time with you in prayer. It feels good to open up our hearts to your Holy Spirit. It feels good to open up our lives to your Transforming Presence. In short Lord, it feels good to be your people! We thank you for your love showered upon us, for your gifts of life and blessings. We thank you for creating us in your image, so that we can be a blessing to others as well. And we thank you for redeeming us, for calling us together in the Name of your Son Jesus Christ, through the Power of your Holy Spirit.

Lord, you have searched our hearts and you know us. You feel our fears and experience our pains with perfect empathy. And you rejoice with us in our moments of glee. You see what we see, feel what we feel, think what we think, and therefore know us completely Lord! So, you are already aware of what we have to ask. You know that we would like your healing hand placed on the lives of.....

You also know, Lord, that we desire for you come to them powerfully. You already comprehend the magnitude of our love for each of these people. And you already know what it is that they need most. Yet we know that there is power in the asking. So that is what we are here to do. We pray for wisdom and guidance Lord. We pray for energy and enthusiasm. We pray for peace and security and joy.

And Lord, more than anything else, we pray for a deeper and closer relationship with you. We pray that your Holy Spirit will move within our lives, that it will fill this Church, and touch this Nation, and heal this troubled World. And we ask this Lord, in Jesus' name, as we lift up the very prayer that He has taught us saying, Our Father...

Communion:

Bill Hybels, in his book “Too Busy Not to Pray” says “the next time you’re in an airport, notice the difference between passengers who have confirmed tickets and those on standby. Those who have confirmed tickets are relaxed, they’re confident and expectant. Those on standby hang around the ticket counter, they pace and smoke, pace and smoke, pace and smoke...all because of uncertainty. God offers us freedom from the burden of uncertainty, so we can know for sure where we stand with God.” This table is a reminder of that Promise.