

Second Sunday in Lent – 2023

Genesis 12:1-9

Romans 4:1-8, 13-17

John 3:1-17

Swing; is it something that you sit on and project yourself back and forth or is it something that a ball player does with a bat? Bolt; is it a reference to a shaft of lightning flashing across the sky or is it a piece of hardware that is used to fasten two things together? Bark; is it something that a dog does or is it the outer part of a tree? I could go on. Newspaper headlines can often imply something that they didn't intend by being careless with their diction. Here are a few examples. Panda Mating Fails; Veterinarian Takes Over. Miners Refuse to Work After Death. Children Make Nutritious Snacks. You get the idea. On the other side, newspaper headlines can be sly with their words, conveying more than one idea with a single line. Clinton Addresses Lewinsky Scandal: More Lies Ahead. Language is a beautiful thing.

God loves language. I suspect that He loves English but I know that He totally loves Hebrew and Greek. Hebrew and Greek are the languages which He used to record His Holy Word. The OT was written in Hebrew. The NT was written in Greek. 2 Timothy says this: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Timothy 3:16). That "breathed out" bit is an allusion to creation. God breathed into Adam the breath of life and Adam became a living creature (Genesis 2:1). God's breath is God's Spirit. On Easter, Jesus breathed on His disciples and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). By His death and resurrection, Jesus brings a new creation. So when St. Paul writes that "All Scripture is breathed out by God" he is affirming that this is an inspired Word, a Word that is alive with God's Spirit. "The Word of God is living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). The language is exquisite, ripe with meaning, beautifully descriptive. Holy Scripture is an artist's brush that depicts the divine masterpiece of Christ crucified and triumphant and His church sitting at His feet. The painting moves, it's alive, and it pulls the listener into the scene. You are the listener.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus to probe the One who is eternal Truth, the One who is eternal Life. "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). Think about that for a minute. Would you describe George Washington as a community organizer? Would you say that Neil Armstrong went on a nice little outing? When Nicodemus says to Jesus that no one could do the things that you do unless God is with him, he's radically underestimating the point. What is the point? Jesus *is* God; that's why He is doing these things. He's come to usher in a new creation. That new creation is breaking into the old as He heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, and raises the dead. God is not *with* Jesus; Jesus is God and God is *with* us.

After Nicodemus says this, the Lord totally changes the subject. Nope, not talking about that Nicodemus. And then Jesus lays it on him. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Language; it's so important, so beautiful, so full of meaning. Born again, it's a word in Greek that has two meanings (ανωθεν). Born from *above*; that's the other meaning. Above, again; it's the same word; both meanings are implied; both meanings carry their own unique freight. Do you know what a 50/50 bar is? Maybe you call it a creamsicle. It's tangy, orange ice on the outside with the choicest vanilla ice cream on

the inside; equal parts of each and each part makes the other half taste better. Unless one is born again, born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God. You are born of your mother. You are a product of the union of your father and your mother. They were and are sinners. Adam and Eve had sinful children. Your mother and father are the same. We do not live in paradise. You were born with a congenital defect, a radical one. In sin did your mother conceive you (Psalm 51:5). Death is in your blood. You must be born again, born from above.

But how? Isn't that the critical question? How are we to be born again, born from above? Would you say that Jesus is born from above? He had no human paternity. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, the Lord Christ was born without any congenital defect. He was made just like you, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Maybe being born again, born from above, means that you are somehow connected, really connected, totally and forever connected to Him (Galatians 2:20). Wouldn't it be great if God devised a way for degenerate, corrupt sinners, people who lie and lust and are full of pride and greed – wouldn't it be great if God devised a way for sinners to be connected to the living Lord of heaven and earth (Romans 6:1-11)? Wouldn't it be great if dirt bags like me, moral failures like you, wouldn't it be great if God figured out a way that we could have Christ's righteousness cover us like a garment (Galatians 3:27)? Man, that would be great! Wouldn't it be awesome if God could figure out a way to regenerate man's nature, to have Christ's blood make us holy and wash away our sin (Titus 3:5)?

Some years ago there was a big, friendly guy who came through the line after the Divine Service and he gripped my hand and he proudly announced: I'm a born again Christian. I replied: Sweet! So you've been baptized? He didn't make the connection. Why, oh why do we not make that connection? Born again, born from above, born of water and Spirit – that is Holy Baptism. Christ's life was in the water of your baptism – God put it there (John 4:10). Christ's blood, His death was in the water of your baptism for you needed to be born anew, born of God's grace (Ephesians 5:25-27). Christ's resurrection was there, in that water, when you were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. A new creation; if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). That is a baptismal reality and it is in the language of the Scriptures. Nicodemus didn't know what in blazes Jesus was talking about. How can I crawl back into my mother's womb? Ain't happening.

And Jesus told Nicodemus about love. You are born of love. God loved the world in this way: He gave His only Son. This Son, pure and holy, was lifted up. You needed to be reborn and Jesus being lifted up a cross was the only way to accomplish it. High and exalted, as He is crucified He becomes the perfect Son of the heavenly Father. He submits to God's will. He bears the sin of the world. He renders up His life as an atoning sacrifice. He pays. With His life, He pays. Out of love for you, Jesus pays the price that your sin demands. Love; the Father's love; the Son's love; the Holy Spirit's love; you have been redeemed from sin and death because God loves you. You could be judged, condemned. You are selfish and vain. You put yourself above others. You yourself judge others according to a standard you could never keep. You fail to honor the God who created you by witnessing to His truth. You fail to honor the God who created you by loving the world more than Him. You fail to honor the God who created you by loving your own pleasure more than Him. But Christ did not come into the world to judge you, condemn you. He came to save you (John 3:17).

Baptism now saves you (1 Peter 3:21). That is the language of love, the language of Scripture. That's what the Bible says: Baptism now saves you. On the holy cross, as Jesus died, a soldier pierced His side with a lance. In a torrent of grace, blood and water came streaming from the flesh of the Son of God (John 19:34). Nicodemus was there. He and Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross. Did Nicodemus know, right then, that Jesus' death was the source of all life? Do you know? Did Nicodemus know, as He held the corpse of the Savior, that what He held was God's love, a love that invades hearts and minds and liberates sinners from death and hell? Do you know? Did Nicodemus know that so many, so very many would be born again, born from above, born from the blood and the water and the Spirit that came pouring from Christ in death? We know. A new love resides in the baptized; Christ's love. God loved the world in this way, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Yes, you are loved. The language of Scripture is beautifully clear.