

March 05, 2023

John 3:1-17

“This Is The Way”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On the Way is the overall theme for the Sundays in Lent. A way can be a road that you travel or it can be a “a course (such as a series of actions or sequence of events) leading in a direction or toward an objective.” My thoughts drifted to the following words from the Old Testament:

And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: “Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?” Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his *way* and live; turn back, turn back from your evil *ways*, for why will you die, O house of Israel (Ezek. 33:10-11)?

There is the *way* of life and the *way* of death. **This Is The Way** to Life. Jesus! And Jesus said to Thomas in John 14:6, “I am the *way*, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is like a suitcase that is so full that you have to sit on it if you hope to close it. When you open it all the contents spill out. We will do the best we can to pack lightly.

Right from the start, it should be surprising that a Pharisee comes to Jesus to admit that he is “a teacher from God.” He comes in the night because it is dangerous to make such an admission. He basis his conclusion on the signs that Jesus was performing. They were undeniable. You would have to go against better knowledge to conclude otherwise. Jesus’ response appears abrupt and seems to lack continuity: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Jesus, the acknowledged teacher from God, will immediately go about the business of teaching. He answers the seeker before he even asks a question. **This Is the Way**. To see the kingdom of God you must be born again. To be born again is much harder than actually going back into the womb of your mother to be born a second time. Jesus says that we must be born of “water and the Spirit.” Why? The flesh can only give birth to wicked love for oneself and forever death. However, the Holy Spirit in water gives birth to our spirit so that we are born again. We are turned from the *way* of death and born into the *way* of life.

Jesus says: “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” As the wind blows and you hear its sound you know that the wind is there even though it is a mystery as to how it got there or where it will go next. Thus, we are brought to the mystery of the sound, or the ability of the Spirit to work in water and give rebirth. Our gospel lesson records: “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’”

Yes, Nicodemus should have understood! But he didn’t. What was it that he should have understood? Well, it is written in Genesis 1 that the birth of the first creation was under the following circumstances: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the

Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” All that is made is of the Father, through his Word, by the breath (the Spirit) of his mouth (Ps. 33:6). In the very birth of the creation there is this movement from that which is formless, void, and darkness to light and life. This is understood in the Holy Spirit “hovering over the waters.” But, humanity lost that light and life when they fell into sin. Nevertheless, the Lord God promised our first parents deliverance through the offspring of the woman.

That deliverance was pictured in the exodus and made clear when, by the Passover lamb, the people were set free from sin and death and even baptized in the sea. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, “For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” And through this, they were a reborn people were they not? A new nation! A new creation! They went through the way of the cloud and water. And the ongoing ritualistic cleansing of water in many and various ways, were all reminders of the washing that we need to be changed from formless, void, and darkness into light and life.

Yes, Nicodemus should have known that the birth of a new creation can only come by the power of the Savior and his Spirit, even in water, as it was in the birth of the first creation. And now Jesus is standing before Nicodemus. This is the same Jesus who was baptized with the water of the Jordan, and the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove. In that baptism he took to himself all of what is formless, void, and darkness in us so that all waters might become for us a cleansing flood in the name of him who saved us. What happened at the Jordan was about the cross. It was about Jesus becoming sin for us and the death of sin. This is what Jesus meant when he said long after his baptism in the Jordan river: “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished (Luke 12:50)!”

This water and the Spirit that Jesus is talking about in John 3 is ours. As Jesus said to James and John, “... with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.” And we are baptized too! As Paul writes in Titus 2:4-7, “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, *by the washing of regeneration* and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

And with the illustration of the bronze serpent, we are brought to the cross. Think of it! This washing of regeneration and rebirth of the Holy Spirit is poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ. In other words, the power of our washing and rebirth is in the truth that Jesus was lifted up on the cross to die our death. The power of baptism is in Jesus who lived a perfect life, but was lifted up for us, that we might escape sin, death, and the serpent. It says in the gospel lesson:

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Now, we learn in Numbers 21:4-19 that the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit them, so that many Israelites died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he or she would look at the bronze serpent and live.

This Is The Way. Having been bit by fiery serpents, the venom of sin and death is coursing through our veins and we deserve nothing but the punishment of God. But Jesus became the serpent. He takes the venom of sin and death by going to the pole of the cross. All who look up to him - all who believe - receive forgiveness, life, and salvation. Peter writes in his first epistle (2:24): “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” And Paul writes in Romans 6:1-4,

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

This Is The Way. Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/way>