

## **Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**June 7, 2009**

### **Trinity Sunday**

In the Name of our One ever present yet ever elusive God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, Trinity Sunday, marks the end of a long post Easter Season that was filled with heavily theological readings. Today, many preachers are trying to explain the nature of God to their congregations. I think Martin Luther had it right when he said we only know of what we experience of God, the ultimate reality is beyond us.

Our readings today span more than one thousand years of a people's experience of God. If there is a common thread in them, I believe it is the majestic power of God that is only equaled only by the mystery of God.

Today's Psalm is a liturgical enthronement hymn. God's voice is in the mighty waters, it breaks mighty cedar trees like twigs, can strip a forest bare and make vast expanses of ground shake. God sits enthroned over all the heavenly beings as well as the earth.

In Our reading from Isaiah, the year is about 742BC and Isaiah in a vision is being called into the boss' office. Now no one alive has ever seen the boss before and so Isaiah enters with great trepidation. The office is the Holy of Holies of the Temple and it is filled with heavenly beings who sing praises to God so loudly that the massive stone building shakes. Isaiah knows he is in way over his head. No one has seen God and lived to tell of it. Isaiah is so far out of his league he probably wants to disappear into the floor. But God has other plans. He cleanses him to make him worthy to carry God's words of judgment to the nation. It is the call and commissioning of a prophet to go carry God's word. God is conscious of what goes on and has opinions of it.

Our Gospel lesson is from John and it is a familiar one to many of you – especially John 3:16 which we see plastered on billboards and carried like a mantra by fans to football games. And while I admire the fervor of the sign wavers’ faith, I must admit that I find the absolute certainty in all things that they often exhibit is a bit naïve at best. Often when we think we know things – especially when we haven’t worked very hard for that knowledge – we tend to believe that we own and control what we think we know! I mean, I think the faith journey is a bit more complex than waving signs at sports events. When I am asked if I have been born again by someone who knows the exact date and time when he or she was born again, I answer, “Why, yes, I have - many times actually.”

Perhaps that is why I enjoy that John 3:16 -18 is part of a larger story involving Jesus’ encounter with a man named Nicodemus. I absolutely love Nicodemus; he is so very human, so very three dimensional for a character in the New Testament. I wish everyone, myself included, would be more like Nicodemus, but the truth is that if you asked the average person, “What do you think of Nicodemus?” they would probably think you said “nicodermus” and tell you either that they never smoked or at least hadn’t tried the patch! That’s too bad because I think Nicodemus has a lot to teach us about the knowledge of God and making a journey in faith – especially on Trinity Sunday.

The chronology of John’s Gospel is different from that of the Synoptic Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus goes to Jerusalem only once at the end of his ministry. In John, he goes to Jerusalem three times. We are reading about Jesus’ first visit to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover early in his ministry. There he performed many signs of great wonder and had cleansed the Temple by chasing out the vendors and moneychangers. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, that is, a pious Jew learned in the Law and one who was “a leader of the Jews.” Many biblical scholars believe John’s Nicodemus to be the same as Nicodemus ben Gurion, a noted first century schol-

ar who was also a leader of the Temples governing body. In any event, he was a VIP and a well known and respected member of society. However following Jesus' teaching and acts of wonder and after his actions in the Temple, Nicodemus was curious about this Jesus.

One night he comes to Jesus. Notice he comes at night. No fool he! Nicodemus knows Jesus is controversial and being seen with him would cause talk and Nicodemus certainly didn't want his curiosity to jeopardize his day job! Nicodemus opens the conversation with praise. "Rabbi," he says, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Nicodemus thinks he has got Jesus pegged. After all, Nicodemus knows the Scriptures, he knows about God and he thus knows that Jesus must be a teacher who has come from God. It appears he thinks Jesus is like him and has knowledge of God in ways just like his own.

Now begins a conversation where Jesus and Nicodemus talk past one another. Jesus replies, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus takes this literally and asks how can one be born after they are old. Can they enter the womb a second time? Jesus then goes off talking about being born of the flesh and being born of the Spirit. Don't be amazed, Jesus advises, "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." Nicodemus is now totally confused. What is this man talking about? Jesus sees his befuddlement and points out that as a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus actually knows very little about God and how God operates. Jesus then explains his mission and ministry to a totally uncomprehending Nicodemus. There it is spelled out just like on those signs and Nicodemus just doesn't get it. It is not what he was taught. It is not what he expects. In fact he can't make any sense out of this.

It seems that Nicodemus visited Jesus at night with knowledge of the law and a powerful position and he expected Jesus to know and to teach along the same lines as Nicodemus knew things and taught. Unfortunately, Nicodemus left that encounter in total confusion, completely

disoriented and with far more questions than answers.

We don't know what Nicodemus did, but the good news is that this conversation with Jesus wasn't the end of his dealings with Jesus. In John 7:50-52, Nicodemus, the important Pharisee who wouldn't be seen in daylight talking with Jesus is now found defending Jesus to the Chief Priest and other leaders who were seeking his arrest by the Temple police saying that Jesus under the law deserved a fair hearing. What happened? We don't know. But something happened to embolden a man who was afraid even to be seen talking to Jesus to change into a man who publicly defended him to his peers. Nicodemus must have kept an open enough mind to continue watching this fellow Jesus.

But that's not all! We encounter Nicodemus a third and last time in John 19:38-42. This time, following the crucifixion, we find Nicodemus arriving with Joseph Arremetha to boldly ask Pilate for Jesus' body and to themselves prepare the body for burial and place it in the tomb. Remember, the Apostles had all fled. Nicodemus not only provides enough oils and perfumes for a royal burial, but he – himself a Pharisee learned in the law- was willing to defile himself under the Law by touching a dead body – and that of a crucified criminal and a branded enemy of Rome to boot!

We don't know how or why, but Nicodemus went from knowledge to faith, from a man learned in what had always been taught about God and our relationship with God to a man who was a disciple of Jesus. Nicodemus probably thought he had the upper hand over most people in knowing God when he first visited Jesus. The wind blows; we don't know where it comes from and where it will go. We only hear the sound of it. Through Jesus he learned that God is love and, like the wind, is only seen in its fruits. Nicodemus apparently saw the love of God in the life, teachings and love of Jesus of Nazareth.

So I am not going to explain to you the nature of God and the meaning of the Trinity this Sunday. Nicodemus knew his Scriptures and when he first spoke with Jesus, he probably

thought he had the upper hand in knowing God and what God was about. But God is love and, like the wind which is seen only in the movement of the branches, God is found in the fruits of that love. Nicodemus was able to look beyond his own certainties and expectations to see the fruits of God in the life, teachings and love of Jesus. For most of us, faith is a journey filled with unexpected observations and questions rather than a moment of certainty.

What is really important is an open mindedness, curiosity, and a sense of wonder when we consider the greatness of the Creator. Amen.