



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Trinity Sunday: Born of Water and the Spirit

St. John 3:1-17

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Years ago in my life as a computer tech, I made a house-call to the home of an elderly couple whose children had signed them up for Internet service as a Christmas present. I went out to get this couple set up with a modem and all the software they'd need to get online and to communicate with their family. I quickly set everything up and then had the woman sit down next to me so that I could show her how everything worked. I clicked on the "Connect" button and we listened as the modem made those familiar touch-tone dialing sounds, connecting to the Internet service provider. But then the modem on the other end picked up and this woman, startled, jumped out of her seat when loud noises started emitting from the modem. You remember those noises. Static and beeps and bwongs and more static and more beeps and bwongs until the connection was made. It was so normal to me that it didn't occur to me to warn her that the modem was about to make some funny noises. She thought something was broken or that the modem or the computer was about to catch on fire.

So I had to explain the concept of network "handshaking". When your modem connects to another modem over the phone lines, they send signals back and forth until they find something that works for them—something that's sort of mutually intelligible and reliable. Sometimes you might have an old, slow modem. Sometimes—maybe if you dial up at a busy time of day—instead of getting one of the ISP's fancy new modems, you get one of the old, slow, back-up

ones. And sometimes—especially back in those days—it could be hard to get a good line with a clear signal. So the two modems send packets of data back and forth and check with each other to make sure that what's received on one end matches what was sent on the other. And when ideal, it happens quickly and the data might go back and forth at high speed, and other times—those times when the static and the beeps and the bwongs go on and on and on—the line might not be so good and the data's getting corrupted or your modem is slower than the one on the other end and it keeps having to negotiate downward to a slower speed until it finally finds one that your modem and the line can handle.

She sat there for a minutes and then turned to me and said, "That sounds like God trying to talk to me. He tries to tell me something and I'm too slow or too thick to understand or too stuck in my own way to obey. Sometimes he calls back later. Sometimes he just keeps telling me until he's dumbed it down to the point that I can finally understand it. But he doesn't give. Everything he has to say is important and he always makes sure I get the message, even if it takes a long time." I kind of laughed and said, "Yes, something like that." What I was thinking was, "You and me both, Lady. You and me both." Do you ever feel like that? I know the Lord does. He's been feeling like that since he created the human race. But it must be especially frustrating when your own people are blind or dumb or confused or just plain obstinate and don't get the message. Thankfully our God is patient—and we see that too, all the way through the story of God and humanity.

In today's Gospel we read about the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. It's an interesting scripture lesson to have on Trinity Sunday and that's because long before Trinity Sunday was Trinity Sunday, it was simply the Sunday after Pentecost. Usually our major feast

days like Christmas and Easter, Ascension and Pentecost have lessons that focus on the events we're remembering, but there's usually a Sunday before or after where the lessons then explain the significance of those events. So our lessons today originally did that for the feast of Pentecost. But when Trinity Sunday came along no one changed the lessons, because here we see the Trinity revealed in the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus, we see the Trinity revealed as Israel's story reaches its climax in Jesus and as the Spirit is poured out on God's people. Really, our readings from John's Gospel through Easter and Ascensiontide keep pointing us to this. Over and over we hear Jesus explaining to his disciples that the Father has sent him to set his people to rights, but that that's not all there is to it. Jesus also tells them that he can't stay with them forever. First, the Father has sent him to give his life to make his people new, but even after he's been raised from the dead, second, he still has to go—to return to the Father, so that the very Spirit of the Father, of the God of Israel can be sent to make real in his people the new life, the new covenant that has been established by the death and resurrection of Jesus, his Son.

And, of course, as we read in the lessons from John, everyone was confused by the things Jesus said. Which, of course, highlights just how much they needed the Spirit and that highlights why it was so important that Jesus leave them so that he could send the Spirit. In Jesus the new Israel was born and our Gospel today sort of bridges the gap between the old Israel at Mt. Sinai and the new Israel at Pentecost. Everyone kind of had a sense that the Lord was working through Jesus, even if they didn't really understand it completely. At the very least, everyone could see as they watched the things Jesus did and listened to the things he said, that he had come from and was acting on behalf of the God of Israel. There was no question about it. Some people

were thrilled. Some even believed. Others got angry. And that was true even of the leaders of Israel. And so, we read, Nicodemus came to Jesus.

John says that Nicodemus was both a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews and since elsewhere John distinguishes between these two terms, we can conclude that Nicodemus was a member of the part of the Pharisees and that he was also probably a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing council of the Jews. He was a very important person. And John says he came to Jesus at night. I used to think this was probably because Nicodemus, as a leading figure amongst the Jews, was afraid to be seen visiting Jesus by day, but as the years have gone by and I've read John's Gospel over and over and over, I've noticed that John otherwise portrays Nicodemus as a very brave character. In Chapter 7 we see him standing up to the chief priests and Pharisees when they wanted to arrest Jesus. He reminded them that the law required them to give Jesus a fair hearing and in return he was accused of having become one of Jesus' disciples. Nicodemus very bravely exposed the irony of the leaders of Israel. They were zealous for the law, but they failed to follow it—or at least they were happy to ignore it—when it wasn't inconvenient. And then in Chapter 19, in contrast to the disciples who had fled and gone into hiding out of fear that the authorities would come for them next, Nicodemus made a point of bringing a large quantity of expensive spices for the anointing of Jesus' body. These aren't the actions of someone who was afraid of being seen with or associated with Jesus. I think it's more likely he came to see Jesus as night, because it was the only chance he had to visit Jesus when he wasn't being overwhelmed by the crowds. Nicodemus had some important questions to ask and he wanted to hear the answers—and as a leader of the people, he had the privilege of coming to Jesus “after

hours” so to speak, of having a private audience.

So John says that he came to see Jesus that night. He'd been watching and listening to Jesus. He saw that the God of Israel was clearly at work in and through Jesus, it was just that—like most everyone else in Israel—he struggled to reconcile what Jesus was doing and saying with the expectations they all had of the Messiah. So he asks Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher who's come from God. No one could do these signs you're doing unless God is with him.”

Nicodemus knew the story. He knew the God of Israel. But he knew there was more to it. As he'd watched and listened to Jesus he'd figured that out. Jesus was talking about the Lord doing another great work, of the Lord leading his people in another exodus, this time more significant than the last one from Egypt. And he warned about a judgement soon to come on those who refused to repent of their old ways and to get in line with the Lord's plans. It didn't fit into the expectations of the people of Israel and especially not into what the Pharisees expected, but there had to be something to it, because the Lord was so clearly with Jesus.

And Jesus picks up on the question implied in Nicodemus' statement. He says, “The central truth you're missing, Nicodemus, is that you've got to be born again to see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus understood so much. If anyone wanted to see God's will done and his kingdom come on earth as in heaven it was the Pharisees. That's what they lived for. And Nicodemus saw it in Jesus, but Jesus wasn't preaching what the Pharisees were preaching. Nicodemus didn't understand. Like one modern trying over and over to talk to another modern and just not making the connection, he struggled to reconcile his expectations with what Jesus was saying. And Jesus says that what he's missing, what he needs to

make the connection is this new birth, this being born again. And it's important to understand that as much as Jesus is saying, “You, Nicodemus, must be born again—which is how the ears of modern Christians have been trained to hear this in individualistic terms—Jesus' stress is on Israel, on the whole people. In verse 7 he says, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” When he says “You must be born again,” that's plural, it's “you all must be born again”. Israel as a people had been born the first time when they passed through the waters of the Red Sea and Jesus is saying that now Israel had to be born a second time. This is why John was out in the wilderness baptizing in the Jordan, but that wasn't all. Israel had been baptised in water before and it wasn't enough. Now they needed to be baptised in both water *and* the Spirit. The Spirit would finally make the connection. As Jesus had said over and over in various ways, he, Jesus, was sent by the Father, but that it would be the Spirit—the “Helper”—who would come after, who would testify to them about this truth and then that through them, this Spirit would testify to the rest of Israel and even to the nations... fulfilling the prophets, effectively creating a new Israel, and through this new people, fulfilling the mission the Lord had given to them from the beginning: to fill the world with the knowledge of him as the waters cover the sea and to testify to the nations in such a way that the nations would flock to the God of Israel to give him glory.

But Nicodemus didn't get it. And part of that was because the Spirit had not yet come to testify about Jesus. So he asked Jesus, “How can I be born again? I know you're not talking about returning to my mother's womb, but what *do* you mean? A person is only born once.” And as he answers Nicodemus, this is where Jesus switches from saying things like “Unless one is born again” to “Unless you—all of you—are born again”.

Because it's not so much about one person being born again or even about a whole bunch of *individuals* being born again. It's about Israel as a people being born again so that she could be put back on track to fulfil her mission—the one given to Abraham almost two thousand years before. And *this* idea of birth would have resonated particularly with someone like Nicodemus, because to be a Jew was all about being born as part of Abraham's family. Other things like circumcision and what you ate (or didn't eat) were important and especially so for the Pharisees, but those things were important because they identified you as part of Abraham's family. They also drew a clear boundary between those who were in the family and all the uncircumcised, unclean gentiles were most definitely not.

What Jesus is saying now is that being born into Abraham's family in the way the Jews had been thinking about it all this time wasn't enough. In fact, it never had been enough. And Nicodemus should have known this. For two millennia people were being born into Abraham's family and God's kingdom still hadn't come. For two millennia people were born into Abraham's family and still the Gentiles hadn't experienced the Lord's blessing through them, at least not on the large scale envisioned in the Scriptures. Just the opposite. Zechariah had spoken of a day when the Gentiles would be grabbing hold of Jews by their coattails saying, "Take us with you, because we hear that God is with you!" Instead, because of the way most of Abraham's children were living, the nations mocked them and taunted them saying, "Where's your God now?" It takes more than being born of the flesh of Abraham. It even takes more than being born of water, as Israel had been in the Red Sea. And as a man devoted to the law, to *torah*, Nicodemus should have understood this. The Pharisees were all about exhorting their fellow Jews to be

better keepers of the law, but it wasn't working. They of all people should have been looking forward to the day when the law would no longer be written on tablets of stone, but engraved on the very hearts of the people by the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, unless you're born of water and the Spirit you cannot enter God's kingdom. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Israel needs something more than a biological inheritance. What does Jesus mean, though, when he talks about being born of water and the Spirit? This is what John the Baptist was preaching about. God was about to lead his people in a new exodus. As Israel had been led through the waters of the Red Sea to become a covenant family, so John was calling people to pass through the waters of the Jordan—a step of repentance and faith—and into a new covenant. They all needed that baptism of repentance. They needed to turn aside from their own misguided expectations of the kingdom and of the Messiah and from their failures to be faithful to the Lord and his covenant. But remember what John promised. When people asked if he was the Messiah he said that he was only the forerunner. John said, "I baptise you with water, but he will plunge you into the Holy Spirit." And that's just what Jesus does. As we recalled last week on Pentecost, Jesus takes those who have repented, who have turned aside from every false lord, from every false god, from every false source of security in order to take hold of him in faith by passing through the waters of baptism and he plunges us into the Holy Spirit. And it's the Spirit who does the work of transforming us. It's the Spirit who regenerates us. It's the Spirit who causes us to be born again as he takes our old dead wood and unites it to the life of Jesus, causing us to bear fruit. And it's the Spirit who finally makes that connection between God and us. Without the Spirit we're sort of like modems perpetually

beeping and bwronging and never quite connecting, but then the Spirit comes to us and testifies about Jesus and the Father and it clicks, it comes into focus, it connects.

In our baptism we're back at the Red Sea. There was the parted sea and God calling Israel to pass through to freedom and new life on the other side. There was no receiving of the law in Egypt; they had to cross to the other side of the sea to find covenant with the Lord. And so we stand at the waters of baptism today. In them Jesus gives his promise: Repent, turn aside from every false way, trust me, follow me in faith and you will find forgiveness of sins and new life through the Spirit. To pass through the waters of baptism is to take hold of Jesus' promise and to be born again of water and the Spirit—and to made part of this new covenant people ready and equipped to live and to proclaim his kingdom.

But, again, this didn't fit what Nicodemus knew. "How can this be so?" he asks. And Jesus asks a bit incredulously, "How can you *not* know this? You're one of the teachers of Israel!" Nicodemus knew the story. He understood how Israel had so miserably failed in her mission. As a Pharisee he was abundantly aware of this problem. Jesus tells Nicodemus: God has heard your cries and is visiting his people and he's doing it in me. I'm the son of man, the one spoken of by Daniel all those years ago. I can tell you reliably the things of heaven because I'm the one who has come down from heaven.

At this point, I think, all this started to connect with Nicodemus. He started to understand, because now Jesus really starts to correct what was wrong with Israel's thinking about herself, about what it meant to be God's people, and about what it would mean for the Lord to come to deliver them. Jesus reminds Nicodemus of an event from Israel's time in the wilderness. The Israelites grumbled against

Moses—which was ultimately grumbling against the Lord—and so he sent poisonous snakes into the camp. They bit people and many of those who were bit died. But the Lord also gave Moses the remedy. He told Moses to cast a snake out of bronze and to mount it on a pole. Anyone who would look up to the bronze snake would be healed.

And now Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up that snake in the wilderness, so the son of man must be lifted up so that all who believe in him may have eternal life.” Jesus is pointing to his own crucifixion. As the snake was the affliction of the people lifted up for them to look at, so Jesus would take the affliction of Israel on himself—he would suffer the punishment for their sins—and be lifted up on the cross. He would be lifted up for all to look upon—to see the horror and the gravity of their sin, to see that the wages of sin is death. But they would also see Jesus taking it all on himself and in that, the horror and ugliness of his being raised up would become an act by which he is ultimately glorified. In the cross we see the love of God made manifest in Jesus. And Jesus says in the familiar words we all know, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”

Jesus corrects the central error in the thinking of Israel in his day. They were hoping and praying for the day when the Lord would come, not just to vindicate his people, but to judge their enemies—to rain down fire and brimstone on the Romans and all the other gentiles. But instead Jesus tells Nicodemus that he’s come not to condemn, but to save all who will look to him. *All*. The Jews thought the Lord, when he came, would vindicate them for their faithfulness, but Jesus says to Nicodemus, even the most

righteous of you need this new birth, this salvation if you want to know God’s vindication. And it’s not just for you. The Jews looked forward to the condemnation he would bring, but Jesus says he’s come not to condemn, but to save. And this is where the part about being born again of water and the Spirit comes into play. Being born of water and the Spirit supersedes biology and genealogy. In Jesus God opens his arms to welcome Jew and Gentile alike. It was the Jews first, because if the Lord is faithful—and he is—he had to first fulfil his promises to his own people, but most importantly, in that act of faithfulness, the nations would take note of the God of Israel. In Jesus, the nations would see that the God of Israel is not like the puny, selfish, fickle, and powerless gods they have known, and they would then flock to this God who is truly good and faithful. Abraham’s family is integral to the story and the plan, but Jesus reminds us that genes and DNA were never really what made anyone part of Abraham’s family; it was about faith. It was faith for Abraham himself and it was faith in God’s promises for all who followed after: for Isaac and Jacob, for Joseph and Moses and Joshua, for gentiles like Rahab and Ruth, and even for the great kings like David and Solomon. And God’s promise was that through his covenant people, through these people who knew him in faith and were reconciled to him by faith, he would bless the nations. It happened here and there in the Old Testament. Rahab and Ruth are two of many small-scale testimonies to that, but here we finally see the Lord’s promise coming to full fruit. It’s what we celebrated last week on Pentecost as Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on these men of Israel gathered from around the world. They had heard Peter preach about Jesus and what he’d come to do. They rallied to Jesus in faith and in response Jesus poured his Spirit into them. Finally, through Jesus, Israel became the source of blessing she was intended to be—not by flesh, but by the Spirit—as these

men and women took the good news to the nations: Jesus is Lord. He has conquered sin and death. In him is the forgiveness of sin, in him is life, in him God has returned to his creation as King. And in him—the Incarnate Word—God makes himself known. In Jesus, God Incarnate, we have the restoration and fellowship with our Creator that he has been working towards ever since the day we rebelled and were cast out of his presence. In Jesus, God’s kingdom—his new creation—has been inaugurated, in us and through us in the world. Brothers and Sisters, we are that people the God of Israel was working to create, to forge, to make new all those millenia. In Jesus and in us, his people, the promises made to Abraham are being fulfilled and we see that the blessing of God to the nations is for them to know him and to be reconciled to him in Jesus and the power of the Spirit.

Let us pray: Almighty God we praise you this morning for the grace you have shown us. Even as we rebelled against you, our good Creator, you were setting in motion our redemption: Father sending, calling, electing; Son speaking, coming, dying, rising; and Spirit uniting, renewing, regenerating, empowering. In the redemption of the world we see the glory of the Trinity and the majesty of the Unity and in gratitude we fall before you with the angels to sing, “Holy, holy, holy Lord God almighty.” By your grace, keep us strong in faith, O Lord, but keep us also faithful in our witness and our ministry to make your redeeming love known to the world. We ask this through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns together with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.