

## **Lent 2 A 2020**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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John 3:1-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Our denomination calls itself the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. There is a small minority in our denomination that want to discard the word “evangelical.” I’m part of that minority. *Evangelical* is a Greek word that means good news. Evangelists are people who tell the good news. And so in continental Europe, our churches are mostly called *Evangelical* churches, not Lutheran. The church of the good news.

But in our culture, in the English-speaking world, *evangelical* means a very particular approach to Christianity. It’s very distinctive. It was shaped in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century by revivals that launched out of mostly Puritan theology and practice. In my adult life, evangelicals have become fiercely political, and have aligned themselves publicly and permanently with right-wing politics. Four decades, two generations of Americans have grown up with this view of “evangelicals.” Most Lutherans in our denomination think they can save this word, that we can change the American language to mean what we say it means. But in my view, that is a vain project.

Today’s gospel reading about Nicodemus has been assimilated into Anglo-American evangelicalism. It’s an extremely bad fit. John’s story of Nicodemus is complex, and ironic, and mysterious. Nicodemus shows up three times in John’s gospel. And nowhere else in the Bible. He’s a Pharisee who resides in Jerusalem. The third time he appears is when Jesus is taken down from the cross. And he brings a hundred pounds of embalming materials with him. And that’s the big riddle about Nicodemus. Does the fact that he appears at the crucifixion indicate his faith and his conviction about Jesus? Or does all the embalming material suggest that he doesn’t understand Jesus at all. That he honors the dead flesh, but cannot perceive the living Spirit? Nicodemus is an ambiguous figure in the gospel of John.

Christians will name their sons after the great figures of the Bible: John, Andrew, James, Paul. Stephen, Timothy, Matthew, Peter. Caleb, David, Nathan, even Isaiah or Abraham or Amos. But no one ever names their son Nicodemus. Because he’s not emblematic of Christian faith. He’s not a model.

So that’s one reason that this story is an unexpected text to be so favored by Anglo-American evangelicals. Another thing is that this story is mysterious and poetic like a lot of John’s gospel. “*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*” That’s a sentence in today’s gospel. No one has ascended except the one who has descended.

That's complicated. We all think we know when Jesus ascended. But it's weird and mysterious and outside of linear time in the fourth gospel. Being lifted up doesn't mean the ascension, it means the crucifixion. The ascension is a puzzling mystery. Don't touch me, Mary Magdalene, because I have not yet ascended. These are all the sort of unsequenced images pervading today's gospel.

But the third chapter of John's gospel does provide a word, an image that is found nowhere else in the Bible. It's the image of rebirth. The words are "born from above," one possible translation. Or "born again," perhaps a better known translation according to the Bible of King James. It's a beautiful expression. Because it invites us into a maternal image for how God acts in our lives. Nicodemus, in his typical way, sort of grasps this. And sort of doesn't grasp it. "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" No, Nicodemus, that's not the point. This is the even that most of the New Testament refers to as resurrection. Jesus himself connects it to baptism when he tells Nicodemus. "*No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.*" That's clearly baptism. Water and Spirit. That's why our baptismal font is covered with a copper dove. Water and Spirit.

So you and I are born again Christians because we have been baptized. We *normally* use the image of the Apostle Paul. Which is death and resurrection. *Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.* Baptism into death and newness of life. That's how it's framed for us by Paul. There's a Paschal candle, an Easter candle next to the baptismal font. Which we light during the season of Easter, and at funerals, and at baptisms. We normally think of baptism as the place where our old selves begin to die— or as Luther says in the Small Catechism, are drowned— and our new selves arise.

So what Jesus is doing is substituting something for resurrection. He's talking about birth. Remember that for the vast majority of Christians over the millenia, mostly babies have mostly been baptized by submersion. So when they come out of the water they are dripping wet, screaming with their baby lungs, and then quickly wrapped up in something warm and handed to their parents. It's a vivid re-enactment of birth. Wet and messy. And usually the first indication we have of a baby's organs working is the lungs.

I'm not an Anglo-American evangelical, but the best of their ministers know how to hold an adult down under the water just long enough so that adult comes up spewing and gasping for air. From drowning to life. Jonah went down to the bottom of the ocean and was swallowed by the fish for three days. And then got a second chance. Three days, just like Jesus in the tomb. So this whole idea of Jesus dying and being raised, and our being joined to him by baptism into our own death and resurrection— these are the all-pervasive images of becoming a Christian. And now given a new spin by Jesus, invoking the somewhat maternal idea of re-birth.

Anglo-American evangelicals have completely undone all of this by using "born again" to describe a personal conversion experience that occurs prior to baptism. That's their big idea.

Babies aren't Christians. People come to a point in their life where they meet God and either accept or reject God. And that moment is the conversion experience. And then baptism *after the fact* symbolizes what happened. The conversion is the fact. The baptism is the symbol. So it is not a sacrament. Which it is for us Lutherans and many other Christians.

So what Anglo-American evangelicalism has done with this story is to take John 3:16 out of context, and to take "born again" out of context, and to create a narrative about how one becomes a Christian. It's the wrong story. They have a really great story in the conversion of Saul. Saul is a classic convert. He's evil, he meets Jesus, and he repents. And *then* he is baptized. That's a good story for Anglo-American evangelicals. A classic conversion from bad to good. Nicomedus not so much.

So there are three ways that this story has been corrupted by its mis-application and misinterpretation. I want to point those things out. First. In Anglo-American evangelicalism, being born again has come to mean an experience of God that happens apart from the Church, outside of any sacraments, and transforms a person's life. I think that's a misinterpretation of the text. The text is about resurrection and baptism, and how those things constitute a rebirth.

Second, in Anglo-American evangelicalism, the focus is placed on the action and choice of the individual. You find Jesus. You choose Jesus. In the story of Nicodemus, and certainly in the fourth gospel, God is always the actor. We are always the subject of God's action. *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.* The wind blows where it chooses. The Son has descended and ascended. God gave his Son. God sent his Son. God acts. We perceive and believe. But the action is God.

Third, in Anglo-American evangelicalism, the focus is on the individual. John 3:16 says everyone who believes. It's singular in Greek. Jesus didn't speak Greek. But that's all we have. So maybe Jesus says, "the one who believes" will not perish. So it is a personal truth, a personal belief. But the focus of God's action is not on your belief or mine. The focus is found in the next verse, which is truly the more important one in my opinion. *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* Not me, not you. But the world. God sent his Son for the sake of the world. Not to condemn it. If there's one thing that Anglo-American evangelicalism is known for, it's condemnation. That's why evangelical domination of our culture is not truly good news. But there it is in John 3:17. The purpose of all of this is not condemnation. But salvation. And although our translation says "the world," the Greek word is *cosmos*. The whole universe, the whole created order, people and animals, plants and rocks, suns and asteroids. *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the cosmos to condemn the cosmos, but in order that the cosmos might be saved through him.* Now that's good news!

So I think that at their very best, Anglo-American evangelical Christians have some good points to make. Yes, we should want God to convert us from sin. Yes, we should personally

investigate God, and through faith, yes, we should have a personal relationship with God. But those things are expressed elsewhere in the Bible. This story does not express those things. It invites us to think about rebirth, about baptism, and about how Christ's being lifted up on the cross is similar to how the serpent was lifted up by Moses. It's a Lenten text for profound meditation. Shared by a true evangelist, John the Apostle, for our enrichment and edification. Amen.