

**SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER**  
**The First Sunday in Advent<sup>1</sup>**  
**(Year II)**

**Lessons:<sup>2</sup>**

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.<sup>3</sup>

“Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low: And upon all the cedars of Lebanon, that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan, And upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills that are lifted up, And upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall, And upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures. And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. And the idols he shall utterly abolish. And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth. In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which they made each one for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats; To go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the tops of the ragged rocks, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth. Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of?”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.<sup>4</sup>

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus [**nick-oh-DEE-muss**], a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus [**nick-oh-DEE-muss**] saith [**SETH**] unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus [**nick-oh-DEE-muss**] answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. 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.

“He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men

never passed your threshold question, and simply cannot see the rest of the answers.

Let us pray.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; We beseech thee that thou wouldest keep us stedfast in this faith, and evermore defend us from all adversities, who livest and reignest, one God, world without end. *Amen.*<sup>11</sup>

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The Rev'd Larry Wagoner, MSW<sup>12</sup>  
May 26, 2013

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on Trinity Sunday, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *The Table of Lessons*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvii (Anglican Church of Canada 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 2:10-end (KJV).

<sup>4</sup> St. John 3:1-21 (KJV).

<sup>5</sup> St. John 3:1-3 (KJV).

<sup>6</sup> MATTHEW HENRY, COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE.

<sup>7</sup> JOHN GILL, EXPOSITION OF THE ENTIRE BIBLE.

<sup>8</sup> St. John 19:39 (KJV).

<sup>9</sup> St. John 3:2 (KJV).

<sup>10</sup> St. John 3:9-10 (KJV).

<sup>11</sup> *The Collect for Trinity Sunday*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 214 (Anglican Church of Canada 1962).

<sup>12</sup> Supply Priest for Holy Angels Anglican Mission, Picayune, MS, and Christ Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA.

loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Gospel: “*There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*”<sup>5</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

### **Homily:**

On this Trinity Sunday we consider the nature of God. Trying to figure out the existence of God has been a primary pursuit of men throughout the ages, and it was no different in the time of Jesus.

Nicodemus is said by Matthew Henry<sup>6</sup> and John Gill<sup>7</sup> to have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews. He is referred to by both as a “counselor” and as a “ruler of the Jews.” He was a Pharisee, one of those who spent his time as a scholar, learning the Scriptures and trying to understand the nature of God.

Unlike so many of his fellows, however, he seems at least open to the idea that Jesus of Nazareth might be the promised Messiah, and indeed, by later in his life, he was a follower of Jesus as indicated by his conduct after Jesus’ death, when he gave myrrh and aloe to anoint the body prior to burial.<sup>8</sup>

And so Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night to ask questions about matters of eternal life and salvation. It may be that he came in the night to avoid detection, for the forces arrayed against Jesus and His message were already forming and were ready to destroy whomever they might find supporting Him. Or perhaps the only time when he might find time in his schedule to speak at leisure about these things was at night – for he was a ruler of the Jews.

In either case, he came professing that he understood that our Lord came from God: *“Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”*<sup>9</sup>

Now, Nicodemus was a counselor, a lawyer of his day. Jesus, therefore, set before Nicodemus the threshold question that had to be addressed before any of his other questions might be addressed.

In law, a “threshold question” is a prerequisite condition that must be met in order for an action to be heard by the court. If, for instance, a person wishing to argue a case before the court has no personal interest in the case, he is said not to have standing, and so he fails to meet the threshold question and his pleading is dismissed.

Jesus points out to Nicodemus that in order to understand the Kingdom of God, to be allowed to see into the mysteries of God, he must first be born of the Holy Spirit into that Kingdom. That is, only a follower of God, who accepts the rule of God, can ever hope to understand God’s will and plan for the world or to see heaven. Being born into the Spirit is the “threshold question” for a Christian. It is not the full answer, but it is the opening of the door, after which must follow the fuller investigation, exploration, consumption and understanding of God’s will.

Nicodemus, we know, did not understand this challenge. He questioned our Lord how he might be “born again” if he was already a man of adult age. Like many lawyers, he was being too literal to be able to make much sense of Jesus’ words. We do understand today what Jesus meant. We are surely born only once of the body, but we are spiritually born again into the life we experience in God when we make an adult, conscious, reasoned choice to follow Him.

Just as our physical birth changes us, moving us from total dependence on our mother into an independent being, our spiritual birth moves us from an unformed, uninspired life without direction into a life dedicated to and guided by God. We spend the rest of our lives living ever more fully into the will of God, being guided by the Holy Spirit in our rebirth.

But that rebirth must happen first. Our threshold question must be successfully addressed. When Nicodemus, confused by the demands on him, questioned how it could be that with all his learning he could not approach the answers he sought, Jesus gently unbraided him: *“Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?”*<sup>10</sup> How could you be so learned in all the laws and history of Israel, and of the relationship between God and His people and not understand what He asks of you?

You must believe God in all things, and trust Him. Let go of your own self-importance and deluded notions about how much you know when you are facing the all-knowing. If you understand that Jesus is in fact a teacher sent from God, and in fact is God Himself, then trust in what He says. Obey Him.

To do anything else is to say that you do not really believe that He is God, and you do not really believe that God is all-powerful. It is to say that you are not born of the Holy Spirit sent from God to give all knowledge and faith. It is to say you