

Readings for January 25th

John 3:1-21

The New Birth

³ Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus at night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” ³ Jesus responded and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless someone is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a person be born when he is old? He cannot enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born, can he?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which has been born of the flesh is flesh, and that which has been born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it is coming from and where it is going; so is everyone who has been born of the Spirit.”

⁹ Nicodemus responded and said to Him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “You are the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, except He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes will have eternal life in Him.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ The one who believes in Him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, so that his deeds will not be exposed. ²¹ But the one who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds will be revealed as having been performed in God.”

Second Reading

Psalm 139:13-18

¹³ For You created my innermost parts;
You wove me in my mother’s womb.

¹⁴ I will give thanks to You, because ^[1]I am awesomely and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from You

*When I was made in secret,
 And skillfully formed in the depths of the earth;
¹⁶ Your eyes have seen my formless substance;
 And in Your book were written
 All the days that were ordained for me,
 When as yet there was not one of them.
¹⁷ How precious also are Your thoughts for me, God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸ Were I to count them, they would outnumber the sand.
 When I awake, I am still with You.*

Sermon: Born Anew in Christ And His Word

Prayer:

Christ in your mercy, you have given us the Grace of Forgiveness through your sacrifice on the cross, this gift requires that in our hearts we are “born anew”, through our faith in you. Let us allow ourselves to feel the greatness of your gift, let it move our hearts, and minds to your will, and how we treat one another. Guide me in my sermon today to be your servant to our congregation.

Amen

Imagine for a second Nicodemus speaking to Jesus in this story.
 He comes in the middle of the night with questions he wishes Jesus to answer.

The questions, might imply that Nicodemus is considering Christ; could he be the Messiah?

We don't know how Nicodemus resolves this personal dilemma. Perhaps that is a lesson of its own; that only Christ knows who are saved through their faith in him.

It is worth noting however that we will find Nicodemus mentioned two more times in John: in John 7:50 where he defends Christ against the other Pharisees, and in John 19:39 – 40. In this verse he brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes to help Joseph of Arimathea to wash and wrap Christ's body for the tomb.

What is interesting however is the imagery in this story; Nicodemus comes to Christ in darkness.

Could there be a better analogy of how we all come to Christ?? We are all in darkness without Christ in our lives.

Nicodemus asks his question of Jesus, and this question seems to imply something more than trickery:

“Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

Jesus now makes the statement that directs us as Christians to what must be done to receive him and his forgiveness:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless someone is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

My friends, this is the “money line” right there. Nicodemus is confused, as most people who have never studied Christianity would be, how is this that we can be “born anew”.

The answer is that when we accept Christ fully into our lives, that we will try to align ourselves with Christ and with God’s will. We will attempt to change our priorities and move our focus towards God.

To be born anew means that the Holy Spirit has become a part of our conscious self, and that when we act and react within the world around us, we hear and hopefully follow, the guidance of God’s will.

Will we **always** follow it?

Most likely not.

We will make poor choices, we will be selfish, and we will be guided by our baser instincts from time to time. The question when we fail and sin, is what can we do?

If we are born anew in Christ, we will turn to repentance, not just as a reflexive request for forgiveness, but as a consuming desire to change and be more attentive to the will and guidance of Christ in our lives.

If you have ever read Dietrich Bonhoeffer you would immediately recognize this as the separation of the “potential of receiving grace” and **the acceptance of that gift of grace.**

This is the difference between **“Cheap Grace”, versus** the real relationship with Christ through **“Costly Grace”.**

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the kingly rule of Christ; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. It is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life and delivered him up for us.”

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/423945-cheap-grace-means-grace-sold-on-the-market-like-cheapjacks>

The last time I preached at Zion and Bethlehem, I left Bethlehem asking some members a question.

The question was; could one receive forgiveness if one wasn't repentant?

When Jesus talks about light and evil, he is answering this question:

The one who believes in Him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil.

For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, so that his deeds will not be exposed.

But the one who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds will be revealed as having been performed in God."

So what is it that we should be repentant of?

Let us start by reminding ourselves of what Christ said in Matthew 5:17:

"Do not presume that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter shall pass from the Law, until all is accomplished! Therefore, whoever nullifies one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Now in context, this contrasts with what we are preaching today; that our forgiveness is based on our faith. It is also in contrast to how Christ sometimes ignored Jewish law with things like touching lepers, dining with those judged unclean and other traditional laws.

So what is going on here??

When Christ starts talking about the Law and the Prophets, there is a bit of differentiation between the LAW of the 10 Commandments, and the codicils created by Jewish lawyers and Rabbis.

Christ later instills a more basic concept in Matthew 22:37-39:

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' Upon these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets."

So I think that we have to consider how this all comes together, and here Paul helps us to see the meaning: Paul views the Old Testament law as both a moral guide and a custodian that leads to Christ. While the moral aspects remain relevant, the ceremonial and civil laws are fulfilled in Jesus, **allowing believers to live under grace rather than the law.**

Paul's writings present a complex view of the Old Testament law, highlighting its dual role. He acknowledges the law as "holy, just, and good," emphasizing its moral and ethical standards. The law serves as a guide,

teaching believers how to live righteously. Paul states that "the law is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path," indicating its importance in understanding God's will.

I apologize for putting so much on your table today with this sermon. There is a lot to unpack here, and I suggest that if you want to dig deeper; read Bonhoeffer's **Cost of Discipleship**, or Romans Chapter 3, may be of assistance.

Prayer for Renewal in Christ

Lord,

You are the master gardener. You know what is best for your harvest. Help me to abide in you, **so that you might abide in me**. Thank you for sending your son to make that relationship possible.

Be with me as I struggle to make choices that are aligned with your will. I know that you know all the many times I fail before I confess them, but it gives me focus on the things I need to change.

I know that to be your disciple I need to take the time to be with you and to build a stronger relationship with you. Help me to spend time in your Word so that I understand your teachings and your character.

Lord, help me to become a flower in your garden and not a weed. Lord, let me abide in your will and not my own.

Amen.