5-29/30-21 Born of the Spirit Rev. Amy Haines

John 3:1-17

Today, we celebrate a gift—a gift of God—the gift of the Holy Spirit, God present with us always. While the church liturgical calendar says we are now in Ordinary Time, I left up the red paraments to remind us that in order to live by faith in the ordinary of our days, we need the gift of the Holy Spirit with us, each and every day.

And yet, as I asked last week, are we ready? Are we ready for the Spirit of God to move in and through and among us? Are we ready for the Spirit of God to change us? Are we ready to follow where the Spirit leads?

Honestly, I don’t think we are ever ready. And still the Spirit calls us and cajoles us, invites us and empowers us. Still God calls us to follow what Jesus lived and proclaimed about God’s kingdom ways. Still God calls us to trust God and step out in faith, like the long line of witnesses have done before us. Still God invites us to receive the gift of God’s love, the gift of God’s forgiveness, the gift of God’s presence.

In today’s Scripture story from John 3, as we listen to Jesus offering the invitation of God’s presence to a Jewish leader named Nicodemus, hear also Jesus offering that same invitation to us here today.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, a faithful Jewish leader who upheld God’s Law personally and in society. We can presume he was rich, well educated, and a highly respected teacher.

Nicodemus heard Jesus talk about God as one who knew God rather than just one who studied God’s Word. He saw some of the miracles that Jesus was doing. He immediately recognized what Jesus did and taught was different. Honoring Jesus as a rabbi, teacher and miracle worker,

Nicodemus risked his reputation to go to Jesus at night and ask this new teacher the questions he thought his soul was asking. Yet the conversation that followed with Jesus was nothing that Nicodemus expected and nothing that Nicodemus had ever encountered before.

Instead of swapping pleasantries and compliments, Jesus cut straight to the heart of the conversation, straight to the basics of true faith, straight to the yearning of our souls.

“I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

“I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Like most Jews, Nicodemus did not believe he was in need of a savior, for his heritage claimed him as a descendant of Abraham and heir to God’s covenant promises. Nowadays, many in our world do not believe they are in need of a savior, because they can either save themselves, or get by on their work ethic, their family name, their lucky breaks, even their church membership.

Many people believe that they will make it into heaven based solely on their good works or by living a good life, things they can personally control. These are men and women who want

a spiritual checklist rather than a relationship, a rules sheet rather than a way of life.

Jesus, however, desires a relationship with each and every one of us. Jesus also declares that salvation is nothing we can earn; rather, salvation is a gift from God.

No matter who we are, no matter our social status in the community, no matter our position in the church, no matter how pious or prodigal we have acted in life, no matter how many commandments we have kept or broken, nothing we do gets us into the kingdom of God.

We cannot earn our way into a relationship with God Almighty.

Our salvation is based on God’s love, love that embraces all of creation.

As we hear in verses 16-17:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 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.” (NRSV)

Salvation is God’s gift of love and forgiveness and God’s ongoing presence with us through the Holy Spirit. Salvation is less what we do and more what God does in us.

The Greek word “anothen” which is often translated as “born again”, also means “born from above” or “born anew”.

In many churches today, to be “born again” means we go to Jesus, we pray to welcome the Spirit into our lives. While that is important, to claim our faith in Jesus, we do not save ourselves.

But to be “born from above” is not something we do, but something God does to us.

I like the translation born from above, because it reminds us that faith is a gift from God.

God forgives. God loves. God empowers. God transforms. I don’t have to save myself—God already did through Jesus! What I—and we—are called to do is respond in faith, faith that follows where the Spirit leads.

When we are born from above we cannot re-enter our mother’s wombs or erase our pasts.

But we can begin life again, with a different set of standards and a different focus and foundation for life.

Instead of judging others, we can see the image of God in others. Instead of focusing on own needs, we can focus on the needs of our community. Instead of being grounded in the desire for more in this life, we can be grounded in God’s promises for this life and eternal life.

When we are born from above we begin to see the world around us in a different way, and then we become open to the Holy Spirit drawing us deeper in faith. When we open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit moving through us we also open ourselves up to God re-orienting our lives, re-birthing our character, renewing our foundation grounded in God’s unconditional love, the promise of life eternal, and the forgiveness of our sin through his Son Jesus.

When we are born from above salvation is both a one-time decision to believe in Jesus and a daily decision to be open to God’s Spirit as we seek to live as followers of Jesus.

Elizabeth Randall reminds us:

“God loved the world so much as to send the only Son to turn our lives upside down and inside out, to tumble us and transform us in the wind of the Spirit, to make our lives so different it’s as if we had been born into a different world.”

-Elizabeth Randall, Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual 2-A, p. 80

Just as we cannot see the wind, yet we can feel the effects of the wind, we cannot see the Holy Spirit in our lives, yet we can know the effects of the Spirit’s presence.

To be born of the Spirit means we claim and live by the gifts of the Spirit, share the fruits of the Spirit in all we do and say, and be willing to go where the Spirit leads us.

As Pastor Edward Markquart puts it:

..What does it mean to born of the Spirit? To have the Spirit of Christ living inside of us. It means to have the love of Christ, the joy of Christ, the peace of Christ, the patience of Christ, the kindness of Christ, the goodness of Christ, the faithfulness of Christ, the gentleness of Christ, the self-control of Christ living inside of us. It is having the Spirit of Christ taking up residence in us and living within us.

-Edward Markquart sermonsfromseattle.com Gospel Analysis John 3.1-17

To be born of the Spirit is to trust the God who loves us, even if, like Nicodemus, we cannot get all of our questions of faith answered. Tim Chester once shared the story of Hannah, one of his wife’s work colleagues. He wrote:

…Hannah used to love spending time with our congregation, but she found the gospel message just plain weird. We did some Bible studies with her over the summer and she kept looking at us in astonishment. We would read about Jesus walking on water, rising from the dead, and ascending into heaven. “You really believe all this?” she would ask. Later she told us what we believed sounded crazy. Yet she kept telling herself, “they seem like sensible people who are able to hold down jobs.”

Then one day a member of our community challenged her, “don’t wait until all your questions have been answered. Just ask yourself whether you can trust Jesus.” Hannah went home and she describes how she was sitting on the floor when suddenly she knew it was all true.

In that moment she became a Christian. What happened as she sat on her living room floor? The Holy Spirit came on her. There was no shining light or audible voice but the Holy Spirit came to give her faith in Jesus.

-Tim Chester & Christopher de la Hoyde, “Who in the World is the Holy Spirit?”

-the pastorsworskhop.com:theholyspirit, edited

To be born of the Spirit is to be open to God’s transforming grace even in our ordinary lives.

Mark Labberton once shared the story of Ben, who was a very successful businessman.

...His family life was challenging as a parent of several teenagers. For him, Christian faith was a distant and disconnected reality.

Then one Sunday Ben showed up in worship. As he approached his pastor at the door afterward, his eyes began to fill with tears. He explained that while visiting Washington, D.C, for a professional conference, he had gone to visit the National Cathedral. He slipped into an empty side chapel and sat down for some quiet time and reflection.

There, unexpected and unsought, God’s Spirit simply came upon him. Ben became a new person. The awe and wonder of grace and truth beyond his own mind, his own questions, his own needs, simply met him and changed him. It was as though his life was utterly redefined, and it has been ever since.

-Taken from *The Dangerous Act of Worship*by Mark Labberton

-the pastorsworskhop.com:theholyspirit, edited

When we believe in Jesus, when we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, our lives will be changed.

As we are saved from sin, we are saved to a life born of water and Spirit. And when we allow that Spirit into our lives, then we are not only forgiven and comforted, but also called and empowered.

The Gospel of John never says whether Nicodemus came to believe in Jesus that night, or went home to struggle with all that he had heard. We do know he shows up twice more in the Gospel of John. First, he advises his colleagues to investigate Jesus more thoroughly before they rush to judgement. Finally, he brings a personal donation of one hundred pounds of aloe and myrrh to be used for the anointing of Jesus’ body for burial following the crucifixion. From this progression we can hope that Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus, that he learned what it meant to truly be born of water and the Spirit, of flesh and faith.

As God reached out to Nicodemus long ago, God continues to reach out to you and I today.

We are invited to trust God’s love and forgiveness. We are invited to believe in Jesus with our heads and our hearts. We are invited to step out in faith, like those who have gone before us.

We are invited to be led by the Spirit of God in the midst of ordinary life.

May we accept such an invitation to be born of water and Spirit, to be forgiven and empowered, to be witnesses to God’s love and grace and presence with us all.