

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER**  
**Advent Sunday<sup>1</sup>**

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

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

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz [**EH-moss**], which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah [**uzz-EYE-uh**], Jotham [**DGAH-thamm**], Ahaz [**EH-hazz**], and Hezekiah [**hezz-ek-EYE-uh**], kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.

“Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.

“Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith [**SETH**] the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring

no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

“Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith [SETH] the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.”

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

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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> *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 30 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxi (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xix (CIPBC 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 1:1-20 (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 180 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

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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 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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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 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.