

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
ADVENT SUNDAY**

The Rev'd Warren E. Shaw¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham [DGOE-thumm], Ahaz, and Hezekiah, 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.⁴

“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. Nicodemus 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

us that only God can correct. And in order to correct it, He has to break us down and then put us back together. Are you willing to allow Him to do that to you?

If not, you will remain in darkness, unaware of what is really happening in your life and in the world around you. For “*except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*”

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St. Joseph’s Mission (ACA)
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² *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).

³ Isaiah 1:1-20 (KJV).

⁴ St. John 3:1-21 (KJV).

of it but cannot tell where it came from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Then Jesus asks Nicodemus a question: *“How is it that you are a teacher of Israel and yet you do not know this?”* Don’t you read your Bible? Don’t you understand the fundamentals of your own faith? I’m not telling you any thing new and strange. *“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”* How can I tell you of the deep mysteries of God if you do not understand this fundamental concept?

Well, we don’t know how Nicodemus reacted to all that. He disappears from the narrative at this point and briefly reappears later. Some say that he became a believer and a disciple and that he was one of two members of the Sanhedrin who voted against the death penalty for Jesus. Some say it was he who planted the Glastonbury thorn in England.

But his reaction is not really important. It is your reaction that is important. How do you react to what Jesus has said? Are you willing to hear it? Are you willing to have your life rearranged?

God is changing people’s lives every day. That’s what the Gospel is all about. That’s what the Holy Spirit does. He redirects our passions. He calms our fears. He opens our eyes to see God’s hand at work in unexpected places. He opens our ears to hear God’s word. He brings order into chaos and unity into fragmentation. And that’s what needs to happen before anyone can begin to share the life of God or to walk in His ways.

Most people don’t really want to change. Most people kind of like themselves the way they are. Most people don’t see any need to change except for a few bad habits here and there. But the Gospel is not about a few bad habits. The Gospel is about a fundamental and fatal flaw in the nature of every one of

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 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.

Homily:

The Gospel of John is notable for its use of symbolism. The symbolic use of light and darkness runs through it like the motif of a musical composition.

In today's Second Lesson, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He is a member of the governing council of the Jews, a prominent interpreter of the Old Testament, but he is un-enlightened about its true meaning.

Unlike some of his fellow Pharisees, Nicodemus recognizes that Jesus, this peasant rabbi from Galilee, has something important to say and to teach. So at the end of a day of teaching, he comes in the darkness of his mind, to inquire of Jesus about the kingdom of God.

He never got to put his question into words. Jesus already knew what it was. So He started right in: "*Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*"

Well, that was a shocker. No rules. No new interpretation of the law. Just a blunt assessment, and a very negative one, of the human condition: "*Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*"

Jesus is saying that there is something fundamentally wrong with human nature. It can't just be patched up. It needs to be completely rebuilt. No man, no matter how pious, no matter how morally upright, no matter how well intentioned, is, in his present state, fit for the kingdom of God. A man must be changed in a radical way in order to be conformed to what God intends for a human to be. If that doesn't happen, he will never see the kingdom of God.

That's a difficult statement for most people to accept. Like Nicodemus, and like many good and noble men and women, we have gotten used to the idea that if we really put our minds and energies to it, if we pass the right laws, and if we do enough good deeds, we can not only go to heaven when we die, but improve the world we live in to the point where it will become the kingdom of God.

That's what the Pharisees believed, and that's what most people believe today as well.

But Jesus says No. Jesus says that our moral capacity is so far depleted that a few adjustments here and there are simply not enough. We need new hearts, new relationships, a whole new way of understanding ourselves and the world around us. We need to be re-created and our lives need to be re-directed. And that is something we cannot accomplish ourselves.

Nicodemus was puzzled by that. He asked, "*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*" I'm an old man. My character has been formed. I can't just forget all I have learned, all I have experienced, all that has happened to me.

Well, Jesus was not talking about turning back the clock. He was talking about divine intervention. So He explained that the water of baptism is the womb out of which new life emerges, and even an old man can enter it in order to be reborn. "*Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*"

It's pretty simple, really. We are not *sui generis*. None of us asked to be born in the first place. We did not conceive ourselves or give birth to ourselves. And we cannot be born again unless God comes into our lives and begins the process of re-creation. He accomplishes that the same way He brought about the original creation. The Spirit hovers over the water while the Word enters in. Order emerges out of chaos, and a whole new world begins to take shape. You can read about that in the first few verses of the Bible as well as in the opening chapter of John's Gospel.

Well, Nicodemus was totally mystified. "*How can these things be?*" And Jesus says that you don't really have to understand it. "*The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound*