

St. Matthew's Church
NEW YORK CITY

SEARCHING FOR GOD

John 3:1-16

Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009

Have you ever been put down, ridiculed, or made to feel foolish? The memory of an encounter like that can last for years. I'm going to share with you a verse about a boy with an inquisitive mind. As you listen, see if it evokes any memories in your own childhood or any other time in life.

Once, a little boy said,
 "Where is God?"
And his mother said,
 "Eat your lunch."
And he grew older,
And he asked a teacher,
 "Where is God?"
And the teacher said,
 "Do your homework."
And he grew older,
And he asked a minister,
 "Where is God?"
And the minister said,
 "Go to Church."
And he grew older,
 He ate his lunches
And he did his homework
And he went to church.
And pretty soon,
He didn't ask anymore
 "Where is God?"

This one of those days in the church year when we come face-to-face with a mystery. The mystery is the almighty God. Like the little boy, we too have questions about the Deity. Who is God? Where is God? What is God doing? Does God care? Why doesn't God do this or do that? Well, Trinity Sunday is when the church tries to answer some of these questions. Today's Gospel reading gives us a glimpse of the Trinity; for we see Jesus, the Son of God, speaking of his Father and of the unseen power of the Holy Spirit. If you are searching for God, John's Gospel gives us an unusual perspective.

Nicodemus: It is hard to imagine there could be a better person for our Lord to use in explaining this matter of being born again. *"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council."* One of the primary characteristics of the Pharisees was their seriousness, but Nicodemus managed to keep an inquiring mind. He was "a member of the Jewish ruling council." That means he was a member of the Sanhedrin, a group of seventy men, both lay and clerical, who had jurisdiction over every Jew on earth. In addition, our Lord's identification of Nicodemus in verse 10 as "Israel's teacher" may mean Nicodemus was considered to be the greatest teacher in Jerusalem. He was nobody's fool. He was an educated man, and an aristocrat, with his earnestness, his position, and his education, and he was searching for God, and he went to the one person whom he thought could give him some answers.

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God." What a remarkable thing to say about the man from Nazareth! Nicodemus pointed to the signs that Jesus did as evidence of his identity. More than likely he was prepared for an exchange of philosophical ideas, but he was not prepared for what followed. Jesus cut him off and went straight to the heart of matter. Nicodemus heard an unexpected answer about entering the kingdom of God. *"No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."* Nicodemus, a bit confused about what he thought was a literal second birth, confessed his lack of understanding. Jesus said, *"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."*

Nicodemus knew what Jesus meant. He realized that at that very time John the Baptist was baptizing people in water as a symbol of their inward repentance. We read about this in John 3:23. What flashed across Nicodemus' mind was: "except you are born of all that water baptism signifies, which is repentance, and that which Spirit baptism accomplishes,

which is regeneration, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.” In other words, Nicodemus saw very clearly that no one is born again if there is no repentance; and along with repentance comes a work of the Spirit in the heart. These are non-negotiables of being born again.

Possibly as Jesus and Nicodemus were talking, they heard the wind moaning along the narrow streets. Very possibly it stirred the leaves that overhung the window and came breathing in upon them. Jesus said to him; *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”* Nicodemus, being born of the Spirit is like your experience with the wind. You see the wind’s effect, but not the wind itself. With those who are born again, the effects of the Spirit are visible in their lives, even though the Spirit cannot be seen. You and I make all kinds of new beginnings. There are New Year’s resolutions, the beginning of school, new job, or simply new days. None of these brings us into God’s Kingdom. Only that which God provides can do it.

The Great Unmistakable Promise of the Cross: *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”* With those words Nicodemus’ mind spun back thousands of years to what is recorded in Numbers 21. With this reference “Israel’s teacher” was on familiar ground. The picture is one of both horror and glory. It is horrible in that the Israelites were beset by a hoard of “venomous snakes,” so many that the people could not escape, and as a result their bodies were inflamed with fever and they were on the verge of death. In fact, many died. What a hideous scene! But at the same time it is glorious because here we also see God’s glorious provision of healing. Moses was instructed by God to make a bronze serpent and to erect it on a pole; anyone who was bitten could look at the bronze serpent and live. Our Lord left no doubt about the application: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.” This is a picture of the dying, sinful world with the atoning cross raised high.

There’s no question about it. God’s promise of eternal life is real and unmistakable. Those who search for God will realize that God has cared enough to send the very best, God own Son, to make it possible.

The Great Unlimited Offer of the Cross: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not*

perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16 shows us the greatness of God’s love, that it is a vast, unbounded, bottomless sea! That is the heart of the gospel! It is not simply “God is love,” but “God so loved the world that he gave.” “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.” “Nicodemus, the new birth is possible because of the great, boundless love of God.” That is the thrust of the words “God so loved the world.

This great love brings a great result: “That whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” When we die we will be more alive than we have ever been! John 3:16 says that when we believe, we have eternal life as our present possession. Eternal life is now, because “God so loved.” Furthermore, he offers it to “the world,” the cosmos, a word used 186 times in the Greek New Testament and always with a sinful connotation. Amazing, God loves the sinful world!

It is through the overflowing, unbounded love of God that many churches sing F.M. Lehman’s great hymn about the love of God. Interestingly, the last verse was not penned by him. He found it inscribed on the wall of an insane asylum next the bed of a man who had evidently found the love of God before he passed away.

The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell,
It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave his Son to win:
His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.

Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were er’ry stalk on earth a quill
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky.

“This offer is limited,” says the television commercial. The newspaper advertisement says, “Available only as long as supplies last.” Into this world of limited resources, limited time, and limited opportunities, God brings the message of limitless love.

Searching for God? Your search may well end by discovering that God has been searching for you too.