

Trinity Sunday – Bob Munshaw

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

*In the year that King Uzziah died ...* Uzziah was king of Judah for 52 years. (Elizabeth II – 66 yrs) 52 years, and he did a nice job at making Judah great again. He generally was faithful to Yahweh, and the country was successful both in military endeavors as well as in agriculture. His reign was one of the few times in the history of Israel when things were stable and prosperous. Enemies were subdued and bringing tribute to him. He rebuilt towns and fortresses and cisterns. He really was a great king, and the people prospered under his leadership. But success sometimes has a way of going to one's head, and we read in II Chronicles 26 that Uzziah became proud and went into the temple to burn incense on his own. This, of course, was the task of the priests, and as punishment for his pride, we read that Uzziah was struck with leprosy. This was a rough ending, obviously, but still, Uzziah's reign was a great time to live in Judah.

Alas, though, when a strong leader dies those who have been subjugated and those who desire power often rise up to take advantage of the situation. This is the setting for the vision and the call of Isaiah. During this time of national crisis and potential turmoil, the Lord spoke in this vision and asked, *Whom shall I send ... who will go for us?* – and Isaiah's response, *Here I am, send me.*

Perhaps we can stop here this morning, recognizing the parallel between Isaiah's situation and our own. Whatever you personally feel about the leadership in America today, there is no question that there are terrible and deeply troubling things happening in the world around us. As I read the posts of my friends on Facebook, I sense an ever deeper divide on social and political issues and an unwillingness to listen to anything that does not support my own position. Perhaps you also regularly see people talking past each other with no apparent willingness to hear what the other side is saying.

Personal brokenness is evident in the lives of so many. Racism, sexism, school shootings, greed, systemic injustice. I hate to be on a Jeremiad rant, but these are troubling times, folks. Is it fair to consider that God still calls and commissions us to go into this world of brokenness as God did with Isaiah 2700 years ago? Of course!! The great commission is recorded in both Acts and Matthew. At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, he commissions his followers to *GO*. He sends them. As Hannah read and talked to us about last week, Jesus prayed for his disciples ... not that God would take them from the world, but that God would protect them as they minister in the world.

In John's gospel, we get the oh-so-familiar story of Nicodemus ... which leads us to the only Bible verse that matters to some Christians, John 3:16. I want you to be born again to the message of this passage about being born again, so I would like to introduce John Wesley to the story. Hopefully you will be able to follow the parallels as we move forward here.

280 years ago this week, a young English preacher (almost 35) was struggling in his faith. He had largely failed on a two-year missionary assignment to the United States. Wesley ministered largely to colonists in Savannah, Georgia, and while church attendance did increase during his

ministry, he also fell in love with a young woman named Sophy Hopkey. Wesley was hesitant to marry her for a number of reasons, and she moved on and married another colonist. Soon after this, Wesley denied her communion on a technicality. Her family brought legal proceedings against Wesley, and he chose to flee the country and return to England.

It was a very defeated Wesley who returned to England ... and here is where the story of Wesley and Nicodemus overlap for me. Now there was a priest named Wesley, a leader of the Church of England.

He reluctantly came to a Bible study one night, much as Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Wesley was well educated and ordained as a priest, a leader in the church. He had been a founding member of the Holy Club at Oxford, pursuing the devout Christian life. This group met daily from 6-9 in the evening for prayer, psalms, and reading from the Greek New Testament. Like a decent St. Paul's attendee, these Holy Club members took communion every week, they fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays until 3 in the afternoon, they visited prisoners, cared for the sick, preached, educated, and relieved jailed debtors when possible.

Nicodemus was well educated in the law as a Pharisee. Pharisees sought to sanctify the everyday world by applying Jewish law/ Torah to all of life. They believed literally in the words of Exodus 19:3-6, *You shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

The Pharisees were all about studying, interpreting and keeping the Torah. Much as with Wesley, there was a desire to follow God as closely as possible. Nicodemus was challenged by Jesus to be born again, or born from above ... a conversion of sorts. Wesley's experience has been described as his "evangelical conversion."

There is not a whole lot more recorded in John concerning the story of Nicodemus. John 7:50-51 has him defending Jesus against other Pharisees, and calling for them to give Jesus a fair hearing and may also be indicating that Nicodemus had become a follower of Jesus. We also find him joining with Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus' body after the crucifixion.

Historians have been divided over the importance of Wesley's experience of having his heart strangely warmed, but none can argue that it was soon after this experience that masses began to respond to the preaching ministry of Wesley. Much like Judah 2700 years ago, and America today, the England of Wesley's time was deeply troubled. Some scholars have argued that if not for the Methodist revivals during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, England may well have experienced a revolution such as that which engulfed France from 1789-1799. Despite his personal doubts and failures, Wesley responded to God's call to *Go*, and God used Wesley mightily in his world. In Isaiah, we have a vision of God in all of God's glory. In John 3, we have Jesus meeting with Nicodemus ...

It being Trinity Sunday, we must move on now to Romans 8 and the Holy Spirit. Paul is differentiating life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. Earlier in the chapter, Paul talks about the mind that is governed by the flesh and the mind that is governed by the Spirit. I think that this is an important issue for us to understand in terms of getting to the heart of Paul's argument in

chapter 8. This is a little technical, so hang with me here. If you want to turn in your Bible, or pew Bible, or even your phone, you can look at this with me. In verse 5, Paul says, *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*

Paul uses the word **phroneo** here for mind. Strong's concordance defines the word mind as mental inclination or purpose, while Thayer's lexicon describes it as the thoughts and purposes of a person. D. Stuart Briscoe notes that while **phroneo** stops short of meaning obsession, it goes far beyond casual interest. He says, "In other words, Paul reminds us that, when it comes to the spiritual life, everything is important and nothing is to be taken casually. There is a particular danger for Christians who have worked themselves into a comfortable, undemanding situation where they are confronted with little external challenge and have so come to terms with their own lifestyle that they see little or no necessity for deepening of the Spiritual life. Without realizing it, they may have ceased to be ambitious for the things of the Spirit, and may have lapsed into a kind of spiritual neutrality which in reality is an ambition for the comfort of the fleshly and an identification with the purely natural." I won't deny that this comes very close to describing me and my desire for a comfortable life in our broken world.

For I am a little bit like John Wesley and Nicodemus. I want you to know that I am the stuff!! I am very good at looking religious. I was raised in the tradition, with pastors on both sides of the family. I am an evangelical of evangelicals (though I know that this is a dirty word now). I have an MDiv, an MTh, and at some point will finish a PhD in historical theology. I will soon have **all** the credentials. I certainly am more Christian than most of you. And yet ... I wonder if I am merely a lesser/poorer version of Nicodemus too often.

I wonder if I don't need very much to be reborn, and be reminded that God is calling me to *Go* in this world. Jesus says that *the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So is it with everyone who is born of the Spirit.* I wonder—am I really following the lead of the Spirit in this broken world, or am I just seeking to be safe and comfortable?

In John 3, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about seeing the kingdom of God and about entering the kingdom of God, and as I wrap up here, I am left thinking about questions that these passages have raised for me. What does it mean for me to be a part of the dominion of the kingdom of God? What are God's priorities? How am I actively participating in aligning my priorities with God's? What are the ultimate priorities of the kingdom of God? Love? Grace? Justice? Holiness? (Or is it just having my theology right?)

As we go into the world this week, may we seek ever more to be people living under the domain of God's kingdom, seeking to follow Jesus' example through the power and leadership of the Spirit.