



Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind

SCRIPTURE:
John 3:1-10

September 5, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are

My grandfather was named Ward, but we called him Boss. He wasn't really a boss, but he did live with one. Her name was Lorraine. He was a paint salesman and sold paint supplies to hardware stores across the low country of South Carolina.

When I was in college, I bought a car from him. It was a chocolate brown Pontiac Catalina with over 150,000 miles on it. We stood at the edge of their circle drive as he counted the \$500 I paid him for the car. He counted it twice. He asked me, "How are you going back to school?" "Well, I'll take I-20 to I-26 and get off at the Lauren's exit." "Oh, you can't do that," he said. "I can't?" "No, for goodness sakes, you don't want to drive on the interstate." "What do you mean?" "Here's what you do. You want to take Highway 178 through Saluda and all the way to Route 39, and then catch Highway 56 on in. Watch the speed trap in Chappells." I said, "I think it will be faster to take I-20." "No, go through Saluda, it's the only way." "Ok," I said—as I headed to I-20.

He was a traveling salesman so you would think he'd be wise about navigating from one place to another, but the man never drove on the interstate. Well, once, he thought he was taking a frontage road, and it ended up being the on-ramp for I-85. He was pulled over and given a ticket for going 35 miles per hour. The officer said, "Sir, do you know why I pulled you over?" Boss said, "Yeah, I'm the only one you could catch. Do you see how fast these idiots are driving?"

My grandfather and I saw the world so differently; it's amazing we share the same gene pool. But this crazy old man from another world is also the man who taught me that honesty, even when it costs you, is better than the cost of shading the truth.

He was the man who taught me that all work has dignity and that Jesus was right when he said being a servant is more important than being a boss.

My point is that while there are some things about his worldview I can't embrace, he was a source of wisdom about other things. Had I written him off as just a guy from another time, well, that would be foolish.

It's the same when it comes to faith. We do well to listen to the wisdom of those who have gone before us. We have a lot of grandparents in the faith and they have wisdom. Not all of it do we embrace, but we would be foolish not to listen to what they wish to teach us.

Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, has given us some language to describe what the church is for. What does the church mean to you? What do we, or should we, mean to the world? Our denomination lists six statements called the great ends of the church, or the great purposes, of the church. They speak to that question: What are we for?

In this series, I want us to listen to the wisdom our spiritual grandparents left us. See if you think they have meaning for us today. The first great end of the church is this: The church exists for the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. There are some immediate hurdles we must jump here.

First of all, I don't know how many people feel like they need salvation. Who really feels like they need to be saved these days? Do you? And the gospel saves all of humankind? There was a day, as recently as the late 19th century, when the church dreamed of a world where all confess that Christ is Lord. But we know today that that will never happen. It seems obvious that God has created a world

in which a diversity of faiths will always exist. The issue for the church in the 21st century is not to make the world Christian; it is rather for the church to be Christian to the world. Nobody else is going to do that.

Our spiritual grandparents have told us that we must be a gospel people. The Greek word for Gospel is *euangellion*. (I know that you were hoping on a holiday weekend to be rewarded with a Greek vocabulary word.) *Euangellion* means “gospel.” It also translates “good news.” The first purpose of the church is to be a people of good news. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need good news.

Let me say more about this by reflecting on our text. Nicodemus is a religious leader and he comes to Jesus seeking wisdom. It says he comes at night. If I understand the text, night is not a description of time. It’s a spiritual circumstance. You know what night means.

In Louisiana and in New York, as they battle the destruction of Ida, it is night. In California, as the fires rage like the fires of hell, it is night. In Haiti and in Afghanistan, as futures seem terrifying, it is night. In the ICUs that have more patients than beds, it is night. For those who face battles of illness or loneliness or inadequacy, it is night.

Night is when God seems far away. It’s when prayers aren’t answered. It’s when life is hard and the future is terrifying. When we realize how much we can’t fix in our lives and in the world, it is night.

Nicodemus comes at night and says: We know you are from God. I think he is asking: When it’s night, is there any good news? Is there any gospel?

And Jesus says: You must be born from above. And this is where the conversation gets confusing. Another Greek vocabulary word. What Jesus says is: You must be *genothe another*. *Genothe* means “to become” or “be born.” *Another* means “from above.” But *another* can also mean “again” or “a second time.” Born from above/Born again.

Jesus says you must be born from above, born from God. But Nicodemus hears: You need to be born a second time. Take a mulligan. A do-over. It’s not enough to be in this world; you need to somehow qualify for the kingdom. I’m not sure why Nicodemus hears it just that way. He has already

said to Jesus, I know you are from God, but rather than hearing this as a theological statement, he treats Jesus like he is an OB/GYN. How can I be born a second time? Have you talked to my mother about this?

The confusion doesn’t stop with Nicodemus. Through much of the history of the church, the church has sided with Nicodemus on this verse, not with Jesus. You’ve heard it, “Have you been born again?” That’s the way the question is asked, particularly in evangelical circles. You must be born again. It’s been preached by pastors and by evangelists. Billy Graham became famous telling people all over the world, “You must be born again tonight.” Folks have held up such signs at football games. And on a lot of college campuses, conversion specialists stand outside fraternity houses (or other places that don’t always hold spiritual matters as the highest priority) and ask, “Have you been born again?” You must be born again; that’s what Jesus said.

The problem is that’s not what Jesus said. He said you must be born from above. It’s different. And the difference is being born is not actually something you can do. It’s something that happens *to* you. Being born is always in the passive voice. Do you remember that English term? It’s not something we do; it’s something that happens *to* us.

But when someone asks, “Have you been born again?” they clearly imply it’s something you must do. You must be born again, so get to it. That’s what Nicodemus asks: “How am I supposed to do this? I don’t know how to do this.”

I think what Jesus tells Nic at night is that belonging to God is not something you make happen, it’s not something you accomplish; it’s something you trust. In the dark of night, trust that you belong to God.

In Valerie Kaur’s book, “See No Stranger,” she tells of a moment in her childhood when she was playing with a friend. She said a white boy came up to her and used a racial slur. It disoriented her. She was in elementary school. He called her a ‘black dog.’ She wanted to explain that she wasn’t a dog and that she was brown, not black, but none of that mattered. She said it made her feel ashamed of herself. It’s not rational, but it’s real. She said, “Shame

became part of childhood after that, stitched into the form of a thousand small insults, stares, and slurs that made me feel strange to myself—as if I did not have the right to feel at home in my body.”¹

Not for those reasons, but I think a lot of us have moments or experiences when we feel that we do not belong. The world has no place for us. When that’s the case, it’s night.

But if I get it, Jesus tells Nic: I know it’s night, but trust that you belong to God... you are born from above, a child of God. To be born from above is to trust that that no matter what happens in your life, you are already, and always, a child of God and that is the good news.

I might have mentioned before that our daughter was getting married. Did I? Many of you asked me if I would perform the ceremony. No, Sarah was wise enough to know that a wedding is an act of the church and I didn’t want to be the representative of the church in that moment; I wanted to be a daddy. I walked her down the aisle and for the record, I did not blubber like an infant, which surprised us both.

Sarah’s seminary friend, Rachel, performed the ceremony. She has done very few weddings, but she impressed me. We came to the moment when I feared Rachel was going to ask me to give Sarah away. I didn’t want to do that.

A little wedding education. That part of the ceremony is based on the old cultural assumption that the bride was... I’ll say this plainly: property. Not too long ago, society thought of women as “belonging” to their dads until they belonged to their husbands. We are wiser now. Rachel was wise. She didn’t ask me to give Sarah away. What she asked of me and of Carol, as well as of Ryan’s mother and father, is if we would give our blessing for this marriage. Of course, we did.

In that moment, I remembered another moment

from 1992. Carol and I carried Sarah as an infant to the baptismal font. I wasn’t the representative of the church then either—just a daddy. There, at that font, we joined the congregation and said out loud that this little one who we hardly knew at the time, just months old, was a child of God. That’s about all we knew. We knew whomever she would become, she would be loved by us and she would belong to God. She was born from above as Jesus said, not a possession, but a gift to us.

In baptism we declare, even before we know our own name, we are born from above. We do not need to be born again because belonging to God is not something we make happen; it is a gift, the gift that love brings. In our case, Sarah celebrated that good news by baptizing her mother: she threw up what appeared to be the equivalent of her body weight all over Carol and then screamed loud enough to turn your hair grey. Yep, that’s when it started.

I also knew in that moment that this beautiful little child would not make it through life without facing night. Those times when God seems unreliable or distant or even unfair. Those times when prayers go unanswered. Those times when it feels like the world has no place for you.

In the middle of the night, to know that you are a child of God, that you belong, that that’s the truth of who you are. That’s good news indeed.

I’ve been preaching in this pulpit for a lot of years now and if you hear nothing else from me, hear this: to belong to the kingdom of God, you just have to belong to God, you have to be born from above. It’s not something you make happen or accomplish. There will be some nights when it will seem hard to trust, but know this: you belong to God.

Trusting that is our first job. Just trust that we all belong to God. There is no better news.

1 Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger*, (2020) p. 13.