

Trinity Sunday  
May 27 2018  
John 3:1-17

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## Seeing the Kingdom

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the gospel for this Trinity Sunday, we listen in on a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. In response to Nicodemus' statement to Jesus that he is a teacher, Jesus responds oddly: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." That then stimulates the interchange about being born afresh, with references to the love of God and the work of the Spirit from our Lord. I suppose the fact that the conversation includes the naming of all of the persons of what we have come to view as the Trinity is the reason for its being placed in front of us today.

However, I would like to focus in on the odd exchange rather than the discussion that follows—especially that opening oddity from our Lord: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

The kingdom of God is, of course, elusive. It is certainly not easy to see or perceive in any way. It doesn't present itself unambiguously. It can be mistaken for other things. It is something that requires a perspective that shifts from the normal—that filters perception. It requires, as Jesus suggests, a rebirth from above. And in these days, that kind of radical alteration of our senses seems a likely requirement so that we might peer beyond the mountains of bad news.

In this connection, I think of Elijah who cowers in fear at Horeb:

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. (1 Kings 19:11-12)

God's voice, God's hand, and God's kingdom are revealed more often than not in the quiet things, the unobtrusive, the matters of life that are most unlikely and least obvious.

Nonetheless, I am convinced that properly reborn, our vision may be cleared to make out some instances and in-breakings of God's reality. I am convinced that we may hear God's still small voice. Even in the wake of the school shootings that plague our nation.

According to an article in USA Today (Eliza Collins, **USA TODAY**, 1:43 p.m. ET May 19, 2018), care for human life was manifested even during the 25 minutes of horror at Sante Fe High School nine days ago.

“Hours after (the massacre)... stories of heroes began to emerge. School police officer John Barnes entered the art complex and was the first one to confront the shooter. Elsewhere in the complex another teacher ran out and pulled the fire alarm to let others know something was wrong....

“Barnes was shot in the process and is in critical condition. Another officer, the district chief, got Barnes to safety...[He remains in critical condition.]

“Zach Lawford, a student who was in a classroom a few doors down from the shooting, told KHOU that his teacher ran out of the classroom and ‘pulled the fire alarm while we were barricading the door. To get everyone out of the school obviously, to get the rest of the school out,’ Lawford said...

“Steve Rose, a teacher at Santa Fe high school, ordered all the students to hide under their desks and crouched next to the door, waiting to jump on the shooter if he came in, student Kaylee Haaga said. Haaga said Rose told the students: ‘It’s my life before y’all.’...

“Student Chris Stone was one of the 10 people killed in Friday’s massacre, according to the Associated Press. Stone’s classmate Abel San Miguel told the AP that Stone was one of multiple students trying to block a classroom door, but that the gunman fired through the door and hit Stone in the chest....

Yes. I know these are small consolations and mere Zen views of a catastrophic event—one of way too many such events. They are nonetheless signs of the kingdom. And I believe that such evidences of God’s presence are everywhere if the world be viewed with eyes that are reborn.

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

My thoughts turn to one of the most inspiring, spirit-filled, faithful human beings I have had the pleasure of knowing—an elderly woman named Elizabeth. She was a member of the first parish I served. She was severely bent over with a deteriorating spine, racked with recurring attacks of rheumatoid arthritis. She was slowly losing control of her own muscles, having found many years earlier that she had Parkinson’s Disease.

Elizabeth had chosen to tell only two people about it. I remember making appointments to see her; I had to remember to let the phone ring more than a dozen

times; it took her that long to take the few steps to her phone. That was, by the way, before the now-ubiquitous cell phone. I could only see her in the afternoon; it took her hours to do what most of us can do in a matter of minutes. She could usually get out of bed, get dressed, and make herself some breakfast by noon. If the dishes were to be done when I arrived, I had to come after one o'clock.

Elizabeth never complained. I remember my grandmother, God rest her soul; she was healthy and tall, but she always had a complaint. We all know folks like that. Elizabeth had plenty to complain about, but never did. She spoke of friends, her letters (yes, handwritten letters sent by snail mail, well before the advent of the internet and email), and phone conversations. She spoke of her broad range of interests, artist friends, old days living near the Ohio River. And she spoke about the issues of faith and life that held meaning for her.

To top it all off, Elizabeth lived alone. A vast majority of those in her condition would likely give up, remain bed-ridden, and live a far less desirable life. She, however, would rise to each new challenge. She began having trouble getting out of her chair, so she found a motorized recliner that slowly raised her to her feet. She had increasing trouble running errands and visiting friends; so she found a company that sold a small motorized cart that she would ride downtown—and around the house if necessary.

Is Elizabeth's story one of tragedy or of victory? Does her life betray the intricate evils life may bring, or does it reveal a piece of how it is in God's full presence?

The answer, of course, must embrace both realities.

The kingdom is elusive, but I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without rising above what others may see as tragic.

These words are not intended to minimize tragedy. The tragedies that we witness all too regularly are real and disturbing and call to our hearts and our souls. We yet seek to see the signs of hope that peak through along the edges of horrific events and circumstances. We work to clear our eyes of tears and perceive in new ways. We look for a rebirth of life and truth and values befitting those who have been baptized. We yearn for the process of birthing to get moving at a better pace.

Let me turn for a moment to Paul. He gives voice to our yearning:

You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

We have heard too many children crying “Abba! Father!”—children who deserve to be heirs of something better than fear and grief. They and we deserve to be the full heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ of a peaceable kingdom, marked by civility, recognition of the worst in human nature, and policies that provide for the resolution of conflict without violence.

Let us hope earnestly that we suffer with God in Christ now so that soon and very soon we may share in the glory of a kingdom that we may see more readily. Let us further hope that we may have the patience of an Elizabeth and the heart of a John Barnes and a Zach Lawford and a Steve Rose. And that we may turn holy hearts towards profound changes in our deeply troubled society and our horribly myopic policies.

May our hearts and our conversations and our actions turn in the direction of a new birth from above. And may that birth come quickly!

Our work of bringing about the kingdom of God is our holy charge. No, that work will never be completed. But with visions cleared and hearts renewed, new foretastes of that kingdom may yet appear on the horizon.

Lord, may it be so. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.