

March 13, 2021

Lectionary Passages:

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Numbers 20:22-29

John 3:1-13



Selected Verses:

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction – Psalm 107: 19-20

Moses stripped Aaron of his vestments, and put them on his son Eleazar; and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. – Numbers 20: 28

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. – John 3: 5-6

Devotional:

A few weeks ago, Janet and I went on a Sunday drive. After church, we simply turned left instead of right and headed out on a drive up Little Buttercreek. At Pine City, we stopped at the farm with newborn lambs. Further up, we saw newborn calves. Both lambs and calves were only days old. While there is something adorable about newborns, birth is messy. With the birth of all three of our children, the one moment that caused pause was right after the birth. For a moment, the child does not breathe. With some animals, the mother’s cleaning warms the newborn up enough to breathe.

The first breath is simply a miracle. Throughout pregnancy, a child receives oxygen through the umbilical cord. Until birth, the lungs are filled with fluids. The first few shallow breaths fill the lungs with air. In a moment, the lungs begin taking in air and releasing carbon dioxide. At the same moment, vigorous circulation begins to carry oxygenated blood throughout the body. As a parent, I anxiously waited for this moment of a miracle.

The same miracle of breath is found in the wind and in the spirit. Maybe that is why it is only word in both Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*). When you read Jesus’ interaction with Nicodemus in John 3, you hear Jesus playing with the word. “*Pneuma*” can be translated, breath, wind or spirit. All three are a mystery. We cannot fully understand them.

During Lent, the focus is preparing for holy week and Easter Sunday. In order to be ready for the resurrection, we need to clean out the fluids that do not allow our lives to receive the breath or spirit of God. If we are not reborn, we are born in the flesh. Our lives are filled with the fluids of sin and death. In order to have true life, we need to receive the Spirit of God breathed

into us. Our lungs, our life needs to be filled with God's wind. That in and of itself is a mystery. Jesus tells us it is like the mystery of birth. New life is beginning.

As one commentary states, "What Jesus knows about human beings is precisely this: that the human being is highly undependable, problematic, and variable entity, dependent on many internal and external influences, all of which work themselves out in relation to the human person's ability to believe."

While some people think they are already God's people, and some of them are highly respected as Nicodemus, all human beings, without exception, need a deep change that can only come from God. As Calvin states on this passage, "we need to be washed clean of our sin by the water and filled with the Spirit."

To be born again is realizing where we are and only God can give us new life. The psalmist states, "they cried out to the Lord...and He sent out His word and healed them." We can cry out, but it is God that gives new life. As we cannot give birth to ourselves, we need to be born again by the Spirit of God. In the messiness of new birth, through the Spirit of God, we are cleansed and given the breath of life eternal.

The image of this action is in the water of baptism. While one is washed clean of their sins, they are filled with the Spirit of God. In the painting by Mark Jennings (above) we get a glimpse of the mystery of baptism. When we are given new life, we are washed by the waters, filled with the Spirit, and claimed by the cross. We may not fully understand it all, in faith we live into the new life.

Prayer:

Loving Jesus, strong Shepherd, your love for us reaches from the cradle to the grave. There is no place or time or situation in which we are cut off from your care. Remind us of that love whenever we doubt our own worth, forget our blessing in baptism or act out of fear or anger. Forgive us for finding life boring or predictable, filled with routine and sameness when you have placed us in your creation. Turn our world upside down occasionally and surprise us with grace and joy. Keep us forever amazed at your love. You restore our souls and lead us to the house of love. Amen.