

## ***"Born of the Spirit"***

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, bless the humble words spoken and the thoughts and feelings of those who hear that we might all be born of the Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Two weeks ago, on Transfiguration Sunday, we discussed during Youth Time, the transfiguration that occurs in frogs and butterflies. Water-breathing tadpoles are transfigured into air-breathing frogs; and leaf-eating caterpillars are transfigured into beautiful butterflies. They're illustrations of Jesus being transfigured. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain where the disciples see Moses and Elijah with Jesus, who is dazzling white, and then God speaks to the disciples from a bright cloud with words very similar to when Jesus was baptised, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Today, it's not Jesus who is being transfigured; it's us who are transformed by being born of the Spirit.

In his book, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, neurologist Oliver Sacks tells about Virgil, a man who had been blind from early childhood. When he was 50 years old, Virgil underwent eye surgery and received the gift of sight. But as he and Dr. Sacks found out, having the physical capacity for sight is not the same as seeing.

Virgil's first experiences with sight were confusing. He was able to make out colors and movements, but arranging them into a coherent picture was more difficult. Over time he learned to identify various objects, but his habits and behaviors were still those of a blind man. Dr. Sacks

asserts, "One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person. It is the interim, the limbo ... that is so terrible."

To truly see Jesus and to see the truth of his teaching is more than observing what he did or said, it's the transformative experience of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's as if we're all initially blind, seeking to be born again to see the glory of God. It's the interim, the limbo ... that is so terrible.

Nicodemus is in limbo. Nicodemus arranges to meet Jesus under the cloak of darkness, a detail that's important in the gospel according to John, for John often uses the metaphor of light and darkness to juxtapose holiness with separation from God. Those who dwell in darkness do not see the light of God. But in the darkness, Nicodemus is curious. He's a bit like us. He's educated; he's confident; he's a leader in his community. He's taking a risk to meet Jesus and he's fearful of his interest in Jesus becoming public. He's a Pharisee, an expert in Hebrew Scripture, and he's spiritually curious, but he wants to keep his spiritual curiosity private. It happens all the time: in multi-faith marriages where the common denominator is often the absence of public faith; in our secular schools and workplaces; in our cultural norms that push religion into the private sphere, carefully protected and unfortunately, often unable to flourish.

Nicodemus knows that Jesus is special: he calls Jesus Rabbi, or Teacher; he realizes that no person can do the signs that Jesus does apart from the presence of God; and Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish people acknowledges that "we know" about Jesus. Nicodemus acknowledges that the other Jewish leaders recognize Jesus as a leader working in the presence of God. Like us, however, Nicodemus gets a bit confused with Jesus' imagery about being born again. If the dialogue

between Jesus and Nicodemus sounds a bit confusing, that's OK, because it's supposed to.

John uses an interesting Greek word that means "from above" as well as "again." Jesus is trying to describe being born from above, while Nicodemus focuses on being born again which sets up a "Who's on first, What's on second," kind of dialogue between them. Jesus says that to see the kingdom of God, you need to be born from above, but Nicodemus hears born again and asks how can anyone be born again after growing old – it's ridiculous to think of entering your mother's womb again to be reborn. So, Jesus tries again. Jesus says that to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born of water and Spirit to be born from above, and he goes on to describe how the Spirit moves like the wind; we can discern it's presence but don't know where it comes from or where it will go. Nicodemus may be stuck on being born again, because the birth process involves the breaking of the waters and the imminent birth of the baby out of those waters. It's as if he's saying, "So Jesus, I get the water and Spirit part, but you can't possibly be born again!"

In his description of water and Spirit, Jesus may be alluding to baptism as we die to our old self and emerge from the baptismal waters born anew in the Spirit. Like the wind, the Spirit moves mysteriously, but apparently not in Nicodemus who remains quiet as Jesus continues with a monologue ending with the well-known verse, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

During a practice session for the Green Bay Packers, things were not going well for coach Vince Lombardi's NFL football team. Lombardi singled out one big guard for his failure to "put out." It was a hot, muggy day when the coach called his guard aside and leveled his awesome vocal guns on

him, as only Lombardi could. "Son, you are a lousy football player. You're not blocking, you're not tackling, you're not putting out. As a matter of fact, it's all over for you today, go take a shower." The big guard dropped his head and walked into the dressing room.

Forty-five minutes later, when Lombardi walked in, he saw the big guard sitting in front of his locker still wearing his uniform. His head was bowed, and he was sobbing quietly. Vince Lombardi walked over to his football player and put his arms around his shoulder. "Son," he said, "I told you the truth. You are a lousy football player. You're not blocking, you're not tackling, and you're not putting out. However, in all fairness to you, I should have finished the story. Inside of you, son, there is a great football player, and I'm going to stick by your side until the great football player inside of you has a chance to come out and assert himself."

With these words, Jerry Kramer was transformed from the depths of despair to confidence in the future. He went on to become one of the all-time greats in football, and was voted the all-time guard in the first 50 years of professional football. Vince Lombardi saw things in football players that they seldom saw in themselves. He had the ability to inspire them to use the gifts they had. As a result, Jerry Kramer and the Green Bay football team gave Lombardi three consecutive NFL championships; five total in seven years. Perhaps it's a coincidence that Vince Lombardi went to church every morning to pray, and every Sunday with his wife Marie.

It's a simple, human analogy of what Jesus does for us. We're transformed by God's love for us. God's invitation for us to be filled with the Holy Spirit changes our whole future.

Jesus identifies himself as having descended from heaven before ascending. Jesus descended as the Son of God, born from above of water and Spirit, the firstborn son of Mary. After being raised up on the cross and

then raised up from death, he ascended to heaven. God gives Jesus to the world as a gift because God so loves the world, but only believers accept the gift. God sends Jesus into the world to save the world, but free-will confronts us with a decision, which is a moment of judgement. We are invited to accept God's gift, to be born from above and to live in the promise of eternal life. If we believe, our present, our "right now," is altered by the promise of eternal life, which changes our future. It's like being born again, whether we are confined to a prison, confined by poverty, confined by illness, or confined by our own limitations. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That's cause for joy right here and right now! Thanks be to God. Amen.