

Trinity Sunday. May 29, 30, 2021. Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ. Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 29, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17.

Gospel: John 3:1-17

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup>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 it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” <sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup>“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“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.

<sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

After hours of hard work, a little child was born. Magnificent! Her mother was ecstatic. Her father thrilled. Her big brother delighted. They held their little baby and joy filled their lives. They named her Sophie.

As the years passed, they came to love their little girl more and more. Her first steps, her ballet lessons, her creative play, her school days, her first dates, proms and jobs. She was the light of their lives.

But a deep sadness came. Sophie slipped into a terrible sickness that kept her from enjoying life. She found herself in bondage to illegal drugs. She ran with what her parents thought of as the wrong kind of people. She rarely came home. After months of degradation, she found herself pregnant. After a few weeks, that baby was lost.

What could she do? She had no more hope.

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Her family never gave up on her. They prayed for her, but didn't know how to reach her. They had searched and given up.

Then her brother Josh decided to try one more time to find her.

He combed the streets of their town and nearby cities; he asked and asked; he went into dark places that scared him practically to death.

Finally one day Josh found his sister curled up on a filthy blanket in an abandoned building. He went to her, placed his hand on her forehead and asked her to come home.

Miraculously she got up and took his hand and followed him out to his car. They drove to their parents' house.

Sophie wondered how angry her parents would be; wondered if she could hope to find a clean place to sleep in what used to be her home.

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Her parents hugged her with hugs so strong that it seemed they would not stop. No patting on the back to distance her. Sophie looked up and said, "I'm so sorry."

She would never forget her mother's words, "That's what forgiveness is for." She would never forget her father smiling through his tears as he said, "We named you, we called you by name, and there is always a place for you at this table."

Over supper there was somber but deep rejoicing. There would be much work of healing to be done. The pains of drug withdrawal began to set in. Rehab counselors were consulted; recommendations were followed and then broken, followed again and broken again.

Mother kept repeating, "That's what forgiveness is for." Father kept saying, "There's always a place for you at this table." Josh said, "We all make mistakes." Sounds a lot like what St. John said in today's Gospel, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Slowly these words took meaning for Sophie. She remembered the Jesus stories she had learned so long ago. Once again her life began to take some kind of meaning. Was she recovering?

Her face looked like it had years ago, albeit with more worry lines. She had begun to gain a little weight back from her mother's nutritious meals. The Holy Spirit began to bind up her wounds and give her the ability to pray.

She looked for work.

And she found work as a teacher's aide in a special ed classroom. There she encountered marvelous children who needed a steady hand, a patient smile, and a faithfulness to task at hand.

As Sophie discovered that she possessed the God-given gifts of patience, steadiness, and persistence, her work became vocation, her calling. If Sophie had been a teacher in one of the schools that suffered gun violence, she would have been the last one to leave the school, gathering the remaining children into the school bus waiting to carry them from danger. It was as though she were born anew, born again, born from above.

The story goes on and on and now Sophie is – as her grandchildren call it – “very, very old.” She tells them stories to encourage them to develop their own patience, steadiness, and persistence – and their wonder and curiosity at God's creation, the specialness of creatures great and small, animals, plants, storm, and mountain.

After many long years, Sophie has gained what some might call “wisdom” – a confidence that all will be well, that all manner of things will be well, that God holds us in hands of welcome, faithfulness and love. She holds God in awe, as did the visionary Isaiah in today's first lesson. This “awe” is a wonder, a faith, a connection with the cosmic Lord, call it what you will, it's a deep, deep love for life.

When you look at Sophie, do you see a baby, a little girl, a drug addict, a person struggling with rehab, a special ed teacher, a mother, a grandmother, a sinner, a saint? Yes, she is all of them and they are all part of her one singular, special person.

Do you see God working in her life as a Creator, a Savior, a Holying Spirit? Yes. All of the above, each in a particular way.

Perhaps this is how the early church understood God. The people in those early gatherings experienced God, whom Jesus called Abba “Daddy” Father, as source of life, creator, protector, doer of mighty deeds: the God who so loved the world. They knew God in Jesus, the one who forgave enemies, taught us forgiveness, and who forgives us still today. They knew Jesus as the Shepherd brother who searched for every last and lost lamb. They knew God as the power that flowed from the love between Father and Son, the power that gave them faith, the power that encouraged them to “keep on keeping on” when things were desperate, the power that eventually led Nicodemus to faith in today's Gospel story. That's the Holy Spirit.

In Sophie's story, and perhaps in the story of each of our lives, we see God's creating power in our births, in our growth, in the creative ways we are blessed to live. We see God's forgiving and saving power in the way that the brother sought out his missing sister, in the way the parents expressed their forgiveness and joy at her return. We see God's Spirit in the young woman's persistence in her rehabilitation, in her work with special children, in her teaching of values and habits to her grandchildren.

[And, just in case you happen to be named Sophie or Josh, be happy that someone chose that name for you. Sophie, or Sophia, is the ancient word for Wisdom, the wisdom that holds the universe together, the wisdom we call God. And Josh, short for Joshua, is the Hebrew word for Salvation or Savior.]

This lovely church is also aptly named for today - Holy Trinity: a place where together, the Creator God, the God we call Jesus, and the Holy Spirit all work in our lives to knit us into the people God calls us to become.

No longer burdened by guilt, but forgiven and blessed to be a blessing to all. We don't have to understand church doctrines; we are only called to be faithful to the calling God the Creator has given, Jesus has modeled, and the Spirit makes possible.

Sophie's story – and our story – are age-old stories. But they are not about us -- although we are part of them. The age-old story began long before we were born and will continue long after our death. But for this moment in time, this moment of eternity, we rejoice to be part of our Abba Father's love for the beloved Son binding us together in the Spirit's love that passes between them, now and forever. Amen.

Think about it:

What would you ask Jesus if you could talk with him “by night” like Nicodemus?