



Free Evangelical  
Lutheran Synod  
in South Africa

## Sermon- Sunday Laetare (Proper B) 2018

*Lift high the Cross!*



St. John's Lutheran Parish  
Shelly Beach

### • The Word of God for this Sermon is written in John 3, 14-21:

- <sup>14</sup>And just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, in this way it is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up,
- <sup>15</sup>so that whœver believes might in Him have eternal life,”
- <sup>16</sup>for in this manner God loved the world.
- And so he [God] gave the Son—the only one—so that whœver believes in him might not perish but rather might have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send the Son into the world in order to condemn the world. Rather, [he sent the Son] so that the world might be saved through him.
- <sup>18</sup>Whœver believes in him is not condemned. But whœver does not believe is condemned already, since he steadfastly refuses to believe in the Name of the only Son of God.
- <sup>19</sup>This is the judgment—that the Light has come into the world and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, and so their works were evil.
- <sup>20</sup>For whœver does what is evil hates the Light and does not come to the Light, lest his works be exposed.
- <sup>21</sup>But whœver does the truth comes to the Light so that his works may be manifested, that they are worked in God.

• **Let us pray:** Come Holy Spirit, give us ears that can hear and minds that can realise and hearts that believe that Jesus is the One who takes us from death to Life. **Amen.**

### • **Dear congregation of Christ!**

- This passage for today is part of the discussion Jesus had with Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees. How did he get to Jesus? The Jews, referring to the Sanhedrin, the leadership of the Jewish Religion, sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to inquire from John the Baptiser, who he is.
- When he told them that he was not the Christ, the Messiah, they cornered him with regard to why then he was baptising. John the Baptiser answered them and said, [26] *“I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do **not** know, ...”*. They don’t know who Jesus is, where He is from or where He goes!
- The next day John saw Jesus and pointed to Him proclaiming [29b]: *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* From the context we may assume that John the Baptiser was proclaiming this to the delegates of the Jewish

leaders! There he was pointing to the very man who is the Lamb of God! John admitted, confessed, that he himself did not recognise Jesus as being the Lamb of God.

- How did he come to know? Through the Baptism of Jesus! God told him that on whom the Spirit descended and remained, this is the One who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. This is the Son of God!

- Then John gives his full answer as to the reason, why he came baptising with water, that Jesus might be revealed to ... Israël! Including the Jewish leaders, the whole of Israël! The Baptism of Jesus as Epiphany of the Christ, who is the Lamb of God!

- So, there was the sign God had provided for Israël to reveal to them, this is MY Messiah, this is My beloved Son. This is the Lamb of GOD. This is so significant on many levels, but mainly it is here that the very important connection is made between Jesus' Baptism and His sacrificial Death. At Jesus' Baptism the true identity of Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, is being revealed as being the LAMB of God, to Israël.

- Soon, the Jews questioned Jesus' actions, when Jesus cleansed the temple. There they asked Jesus, what sign He was showing them by cleansing the temple? Clearly they didn't understand Him. There is a little passage which tells us that many believed in His name, when they saw the signs that He was doing in Jerusalem. But then comes a strange remark [2,24]: *"But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."*

- Many trusted Jesus because of the signs He had done, but Jesus did not unite Himself with them. He kept a distance to those people, which is quite noteworthy. The following will shed some light on this.

- It is then that Nicodemus entered the scene. He came by night and visited Jesus, being one of the Pharisees, and he claimed that they knew who Jesus is: *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."*

- They claimed to know that Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher, from God. How did they come to that conclusion? The signs He was doing verified that God is with Him. Quite a high thinking of Jesus, one could think. But here comes the surprise:

- Jesus did *not* accept this acknowledgement of Nicodemus, based on the signs He did! Jesus basically told the friendly Pharisee, that they (Jewish leadership) neither see the kingdom of God, nor are they *in* the kingdom of God. In other words,

Nicodemus was completely wrong, was completely blind, so much so that he was not even *in* the kingdom of God!! He did not know, although he claimed to know, who Jesus is and therefore who the kingdom is!

- Here we need to reflect a bit what this means: It is not enough to be friendly and to know something about Christ, to believe in some generic Christ. As long as you believe, don't worry about the details kind of faith. Having a childlike faith means the opposite, namely that we come to Christ to hear from Him. It means, we are in the receptive mode, we acknowledge that we don't know. Therefore, we hear what He says to us, who He is and what He does for us. We hang on His lips. We desire to hear Him out.

- And Jesus refers to His Baptism by John the Baptiser, when He says [[11]: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, we”* (Jesus and John) *“speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.”* So, what was Jesus' issue with Nicodemus? Nicodemus, and with him all leaders of Israel, rejected the Baptism of John and therefore THE SIGN God has given ISRAEL. This was the sign given to reveal to them that Jesus is not only a rabbi, not only a prophet, but the Lamb of GOD and the SON of God!

- The fact that the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus signified that He is the kingdom of God. He is the place where God reigns without any hindrance. He owns the Body who is spirit-filled. So, the kingdom of God was right in front of Nicodemus, yet he called Jesus “rabbi”. He acknowledged the signs Jesus did in Jerusalem, but the Baptism of Jesus *he did not even mention!!*

- Jesus told him directly that if they didn't believe the earthly things, namely His Baptism, which happened visibly on earth, how can they believe the heavenly things.

- How can they believe that Jesus being crucified is Him being lifted up, is Jesus being glorified, is Jesus being the Lamb of God to save the world, the solution for the world. Just like Moses had to lift up the serpent in the wilderness to save the Israelites who had been bitten by serpents, so Jesus needed to be lifted up on the Cross, looking like sin, but was in fact carrying the sins of the world and sacrificing Himself so that those who trust in this special person, the Lamb of God, will be saved.

- Nicodemus and with him all human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, need a new birth, need to be born anew by water and the Spirit. The Lamb of God, on whom the Spirit remained, needed to be sacrificed on the cross, because *all* human works are darkness in God's eyes. As Paul says it [Eph 2,1-3] so profoundly: *“And*

*you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” Paul included Himself, him formerly being a Pharisee like Nicodemus, we all were by nature children of wrath!*

- And that is why a birth from above, the birth by water and the Spirit, Baptism, understood as new birth, is necessary for salvation. Jesus as teacher only, as rabbi, as a prophet, only- as all other religions see Jesus- what all other religions expect of their messiah- will never suffice. They all underestimate the severity of humanities’ evilness!
- As at the first creation the Spirit was hovering over the waters, now, with the Baptism of Jesus a new creation was begun by water and the Spirit. It was fulfilled when water and blood flowed from the side of Jesus signalling His death. This also signalled that what He had fulfilled for us, spills over to us, flows to us sinners.
- Take note: It doesn’t flow straight from Jesus Baptism event. It flows from the extension of His Baptism which is fulfilled in His sacrificial Death on the cross. That is, Jesus’ glorification where he is lifted up above all to give of the fruit of His sacrifice to us sinners!
- And therefore, we sinners must be born by water and the Spirit, by being united with the death and then also the resurrection of Jesus, else we will not see or enter God’s Kingdom. His death as the first act of the new creation, proclaimed, will from then onwards beget, give birth, to new creatures for the kingdom of God.
- Those eyes are opened to realise who Jesus really is. Those minds are enlightened to see the works of God, including all of His signs, from the true perspective, namely through the Cross of Christ. All God’s works and signs reinforce, point to, confess and signify Jesus’ ministry as Lamb of God!!
- This makes our salvation so certain, as certain as the Word of God Himself. Heaven and earth will pass away, but God’s Word, including our salvation, will never pass away. This gives us a certain foundation to stand on, come what may! And with the last verse of the next hymn (*LSB 837- Lift high the Cross*) we sing with confidence: Praise to the Crucified for victory! **Amen.**
- *“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.” **Amen.***