



Sunday Devotion

August 23, 2020

Find a quiet place by yourself or with another
and come to God.

This week's devotion was written by William Myers,
former Seminary Intern of Forest Grove

If you are able, join us for worship on Sunday at 10:00:
<https://zoom.us/j/127591875> Meeting ID: 127 591 875 or
by phone: 301-715-8592 or 253-215-8782.

HYMN SING

#625 How Great Thou Art

1. O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed:

Refrain: Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee: How great thou art! How great thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee: How great thou art! How great thou art!

4. When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration, and there proclaim, "My God, how great thou art!"

Refrain

#370 This Is My Father's World

1. This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world; I rest me in the thought of rocks and trees, of skies and seas, his hand the wonders wrought.

2. This is my Father's world, O, let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world. The battle is not done: Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heaven be one.

CALL TO WORSHIP (Psalm 117)

Praise the Lord, all you nations!

Worship God, all you countries!

For great is God's steadfast love toward us,

and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.

Praise the Lord!

OPENING PRAYER

Wonderful God, we thank you for the opportunity to meet spiritually and virtually, and we pray for a time when we can safely meet in person again. For we know that no matter the distance between us, your spirit brings us together in worship. As we celebrate your glory, we pray that your presence be with us as together we praise your holy name. Amen.

HYMN #353 My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less

1. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Refrain: On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand; all other ground is sinking sand.

2. When darkness seems to hide his face, I rest on his unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil. *Refrain*

3. His oath, his covenant, his blood support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay. *Refrain*

4. When he shall come with trumpet sound, O may I then in him be found,
dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne. *Refrain*

CALL TO CONFESSION

We strive to create goodness in this world, but so often our intentions sour and we are left confronting the sin within us. Let us come together and confess our sins as one.

PRAYER OF BROKENESS

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. By what we have done, and what we have left undone. We confess that we have sinned against one another, both intentionally and inadvertently. That, consumed by our own desires, we have neglected your people and your will. We pray that you may open our hearts and uncover our eyes so we may understand the world as you intended and embrace one another as children of God. Amen.

WORDS OF BLESSING AND ASSURANCE

Friends, God has given us salvation through the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. May God's grace shine upon you as you strive to walk with the Lord. And let the waters of your baptism remind you of the good news that: Jesus died for you. Jesus forgives you. Jesus loves you. Jesus is good to you. Amen.

1ST SCRIPTURE LESSON Genesis 12:1-4a

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

2nd SCRIPTURE LESSON John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² 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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ 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?"⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'⁸ 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."⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ "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.¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

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.

¹⁷ "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.

SERMON

Now it's not Christmas, but I would like to begin by reading from Isaiah 9:2, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined". Nicodemus is a man walking in darkness.

A Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, Nicodemus went to meet with Jesus because he recognized Jesus's miracles and teachings as true signs that he had come from God. For no one could do the things Jesus was doing unless they had been sent by God. Now Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, because as a Pharisee he had grown accustomed to being the person who answered questions. The person other people came to when they wanted to know about God. As the authority, if he was caught going to someone else for answers, well that wouldn't look very good. People would no longer trust his knowledge and his reputation would be ruined. Nicodemus had a problem, he didn't doubt the authenticity of Jesus, but he did doubt the authority of Jesus. He knew Jesus was from God, but if he would openly proclaim it, if he publicly admitted Christ as Lord, then what would keep him from being cast down from his position, ridiculed by his fellow Pharisees, and rejected by the flock of Israel?

But Nicodemus was drawn towards Jesus, and so he was trying to have it both ways. He knew Jesus had a lot to teach him, he knew Jesus could help him help others, and if he went at night, he could secretly learn from Christ, and still maintain his reputation as a leader of the Jews. He had it all sorted. He could keep his earthly success, the authority he had accumulated, while maneuvering that success into a covert discipleship of Christ. But you can't serve two masters. You cannot serve God and your own pride.

Jesus saw what he was doing. He saw that Nicodemus was too attached to his earthly position to completely humble himself and sit at his feet in bright daylight. Christ perceived Nicodemus's intent and spoke accordingly. He did not speak deceitfully, but he spoke in a way that could only be understood by someone who recognized Jesus's authority over the world and was willing to forgo their own earthly status. He said, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above".

Now we have the advantage of reading in English, and to us that seems straight forward. Jesus is talking about being born again from heaven through the Spirit of the Lord. But to Nicodemus, that language is confusing. The Greek word Jesus uses for 'above' is *Anothen* which actually means 'from the top', like a conductor might say to an orchestra, 'from the top', 'do it again', 'again' that's why Nicodemus thinks Jesus was talking about being

literally born again after you're old. But Jesus was being literal, he really meant 'from above', 'from the very top', 'from heaven'. It's intentionally confusing like an Abbot and Costello gag. He is using his language like a sieve to sort out those who have gone beyond the physical, those who have chosen Christ as their master, those will not shy away from the light, who will understand that confusion, from those who are still stuck in this world, those who are still afraid of Christ's glory. And Nicodemus falls short.

In the wake of this failure, Nicodemus disappears. But in his blind admiration he follows the literal person of Jesus, even though he still doesn't understand Jesus's message, and we see him again after the crucifixion when he removes Jesus's body from the cross along with Joseph of Arimathea. Together the two of them prepared Christ's body for burial and placed him in the tomb. This is an appropriate conclusion for a confused character trying to straddle that line between earthly authority and the Gospels command that those who lead must humble themselves and serve. Nicodemus cared for Jesus, but he still didn't understand Jesus. He thought Christ was confined by his body, that his message was limited to his life. He saw Jesus die, and believed that was the end. He thought that by rolling the stone in front of the tomb he was closing this chapter in history, a chapter filled by a person who did a lot of good, who helped a lot of people but who was ultimately defeated by the same powers Nicodemus was afraid of, the same institution that gave him his authority as a Pharisee.

Nicodemus had seen the light, but he still walked in darkness. He saw the miraculous things Jesus was doing, he heard the divine things Jesus was saying, he saw the light, but the light had not yet shined upon him. He was a fan of Jesus, he was Jesus's number one fan with a VIP backstage pass, but he wasn't a disciple of Christ. Like the rich young man, he couldn't separate himself from his status. He cared for Christ, but he could not understand the encompassing implications of Christ's humbling message: The call to be in the world, but not attached to the world. To be born again in the Spirit.

So often we are faced with the same predicament Nicodemus was facing. He had spent life devoted to his career. He was a Pharisee, a scholar of scripture. He followed the Torah and guided other Jews in adhering to the decrees of God. He had done everything right; he had worked his way up to a position of power because of his pious righteousness. He had become a leader of the people, ordained by God to instruct the faithful of Israel. He had a lot going for him. And even with all that authority, he saw the works of Christ, he saw the light, and desired to listen to him, but he couldn't understand because what Christ asked of him, what Christ asks of us, is completely outside of human rational. Christ asks us, to turn our back on our history. To realize that all we have worked for, all our promotions, all the tests we have taken, all the connections we've made, all the overtime hours worked, all the papers written, and instructional videos watched, all the time spent building our professional lives means nothing. Christ asks us to be born again from above. To reenter this world fresh, renewed in the Spirit, so we may realize that the work of our own hand's pales in comparison to the works of God. We can spend our lives furthering our ambition, yet even if our aspirations are benevolent, if they are not done in service to Christ, in service to the creation of God, in service to the image of God inherent within each of us, then we have not understood the Gospel of Christ. Like Nicodemus, we have fallen short. We find ourselves too attached to the life we have built.

So, what is to be done? Are we simply stuck on the periphery of Christ's message? Walking in darkness while staring at the glow, unable to bask in the light of the Lord? Maybe. Maybe. But maybe not. Nicodemus's story doesn't end at the tomb. It isn't finished at the end of the Gospel. His story continues within different church traditions. Some say that after the death of Christ, he does renounce his past, a past filled with earthly glory and worldly success. He finally renounces his past, is born again from above, and because of it, is cast out of the synagogue he once led. He then begins a ministry proclaiming the Gospel and dies after living a life devoted not to leading people, but to serving the flock of his master, Jesus Christ. Our faith is not a switch we can flip, it is a long journey, a process filled with failures as we stumble through the darkness. But as long as we keep going, one day, we will find ourselves in the light. Someday we will understand the Gospel and truly follow Jesus. If we keep walking towards the light, an opportunity to give ourselves to Christ in service to others will eventually arise. But until that day comes, walk bravely and keep your eyes on the light.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, we come before you in a strange manner that is becoming increasingly familiar, and so, we begin by praying that in light of the Pandemic these precautions we have undertaken may be successful. That the spread of the coronavirus may be reduced, and that a vaccine may be made readily available. We pray for a time when we will be able to meet again in person, a time when we are having to readjust to normal life instead of having to adjust to these necessary regulations. We pray for the doctors, nurses, researchers, and other medical specialists who have risked their lives over these past few months to give care, not just to those who are infected, but to all those who have dealt with illness or disease. We pray for the people who have taken it upon themselves to make sure their neighbor is fed and taken care of during this time of social distancing. And we pray for all those who contracted the virus, that they may be healed, and we pray for all those who have lost loved ones during this pandemic.

Lord, we also pray for those who have faced disasters recently, both natural and those made by human hands. We pray for all those impacted by the recent hurricanes, and we pray for the people of the Carolina's who are dealing with the lasting impact of the earthquake. Lord, we especially lift up the people of Lebanon, as they continue to rebuild after that terrible explosion. We pray that they may bring new leaders to represent them, people who will be responsible and accountable to the people they represent so another needless disaster can be averted.

We pray for our own political leaders, that they may lead by example and put the needs of their constituents before their own desires. We pray for the resolution of the conflict within our political structures and within our country. We pray for those who are pushing for change in this country. We pray that their aspirations lead to positive outcomes within our country. We pray that if legislation we disagree with comes to pass, that it has a beneficial impact on our country. For no matter how vehemently we disagree over ideas, we all want America to thrive. Therefore, no matter what legislation is passed, we hope and pray that it will lead to the betterment of America and the betterment of the world.

We pray for the families and friends of the American's who have lost their lives from needless police brutality. For the family and friends of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Atatiana Jefferson and all others who have lost their lives. And we pray for the officers and advocates who are trying to make a better, more efficient, more accountable, and safer, protective service for both civilians and police.

We pray for members how are sick, friends and family facing difficult diagnosis and treatments. We pray for those of us facing the pains of this world, either bodily, emotionally, or spiritually. We ask that you be with those who are lonely, those who are grief stricken, and those who feel betrayed and hurt by those close to them. We ask that you bring comfort to those in anguish so they may rest and find peace.

Dear Lord, we ask that you be with this country through this turbulent period. We pray for this state and for this community of Forest Grove that it may endure through whatever trials it faces. And Lord, we ask that you be with this church. That it may continue your work in this ever changing world.

Lord we bring all these prayers to you. Praying together with the prayer your Son taught us:
Our Father, who art in heaven...

HYMN #300 We Are One in the Spirit

1. We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord;
we are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord;
and we pray that all unity may one day be restored:

3. We will work with each other; we will work side by side;
we will work with each other; we will work side by side,
and we'll guard human dignity and save human pride:

Refrain

Refrain: And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love;
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

2. We will walk with each other;
We will walk hand in hand;
We will walk with each other; we will walk hand in hand,
and together we'll spread the news that God is in our land:

Refrain

4. All praise to the Father, from whom all things come,
and all praise to Christ Jesus, God's only Son,
and all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one: *Refrain*

BENEDICTION

Let us follow the light of the Lord as we search for truth in this world, and as you go about your week may you feel the warmth of Christ in your heart and know that God is with you.