

Someone once said that there are only two kinds of people in the world. There are those who wake up and say, “Good morning, Lord.” And then there are those who wake up and say, “Good Lord, it’s morning!” Why the difference? It is all about one’s perspective on life and our understanding of WHO God is and WHAT God is up to in our world. As we will see, our Gospel for this second Sunday in Lent seeks to unpack this mystery. Indeed, in it we discover that the cross of Christ is the key to understanding what God’s intentions are for us and all creation.

Some of you may remember the classic television series *Mission Impossible*. In the show, someone would receive a tape recording that outlined what seemed to be an impossible mission. The recording would self-destruct and then the team would go to work, using their amazing skills, talents, and ingenuity to carry off a seemingly impossible task. It was always thrilling to see how the good guys came out on top at the end, overcoming all odds. And they were always successful.

As Christians, we believe in a God of possibilities. Didn’t Jesus say to his disciples that nothing is impossible with God?! When we place our concerns and challenges into God’s hands, I believe that anything is possible. I have seen miracles long before I became a Pastor and throughout my ministry. Whether it be the rebuilding of my father’s church after an arson fire back in 1993, or the healing miracle that I witnessed firsthand as a hospital chaplain while I was in seminary, or the miraculous ways I have observed parishioners over the years deal with tragedy and loss by clinging to their faith.

Even though it was years and years ago, I can still remember my first night on call during my clinical pastoral education. A lady was having heart surgery and the surgeons were having a such difficult time with the operation, that they didn’t think she would make it off the table. The family asked me to pray with them and I prayed that God would assist the doctors in whatever way He could, that their

hands would be His hands. A few hours later she eventually made it to the ICU, and even though the staff had no hope of her making it through the night, she did, and the next day a colleague of mind told me that the surgeons had said that it felt like someone had been helping them with the surgery.

And yet, I also know that some of our prayers we lift up to God seem to go unanswered. I cannot solve the mystery of why some people are healed and others are not. Twenty Two years ago I lost my mother to ovarian cancer after she had fought a three year battle with the help of chemo, radiation, and surgery. As you can probably imagine, God and I wrestled a bit over that one for quite a while. Although, I must admit that thankfully, during that time, my mom's acceptance of her tragic situation was an amazing witness to God's love and grace; her faith did not waiver, and in the end, she taught my family how to face death with a positive and confident spirit.

I take comfort in our Lutheran understanding of the theology of the cross. Just as God wept for His Son dying on the cross, so I believe that God weeps with us in our times of sorrow and disappointment. After all, when our lives appear to be falling apart around us, in faith we often find that God is there to hold us up and give us hope!

I think it is safe to assume that all of us have found ourselves hoping and praying for a miracle of some kind at some point during our time on this earth. A miracle that might restore a loved one to health, or one that might restore a broken relationship. Perhaps we pray for a miracle that could bring success to our careers, one that could mean financial stability for our families. We even dare to hope for miracles that will bring God's healing, hope, and blessing, into our troubled world and wounded lives. We want desperately to believe that all things are indeed possible to those who believe.

And isn't that the message of the Gospel? Isn't that the good news of scripture that records Jesus' victory over sin and death? God breaks into our world and makes it seem that the impossible is not so improbable anymore. For in the Risen and Ascended Christ, God opens the future to all who believe.

The story of Jesus and Nicodemus is a reminder that God can make the impossible possible. Nicodemus, a leader in the synagogue, comes to Jesus by night. He is afraid of being seen with the revolutionary rabbi, who his colleagues don't understand, or have already rejected, and yet he is intrigued by what he has been hearing about Jesus. The blind see, the lame walk, and good news of hope is being preached to those on the margins—the poor and outcasts of society. Nicodemus wants to know if this might be the promised One. He confesses to Jesus: “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.

Throughout their conversation Nicodemus appears to be so bewildered by the unexpected nature of Jesus' words, images, and the possibilities of his promises, that all he can do is to keep naively stammering, "How is this possible?" "How is this possible ...?" -How is it possible for us to be born "from above" after our first physical birthday is long past? How is it possible for us to see and enter into the "kingdom of God"? How is it possible for sinful men and women to "ascend into heaven?" How is it possible that mortal creatures, such as ourselves, may gain "eternal life"?

And in a very unsurprising move Jesus stuns him with his responses. “I tell you; no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” Nicodemus is, of course, skeptical, thinking that one must somehow as an adult climb back into the womb of their mother and be born once again. He mistakenly believes the Lord is talking about an earthly birth, while Jesus is actually referring to a spiritual re-birth. And what we have in their conversation, is a reference to baptism as Jesus

suggests “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit.” In this way, God is able to accomplish what Nicodemus thought to be impossible.

"You must be born again," says Jesus, meaning that you must experience a time of second birth. And simultaneously he says, "You must be born from above," pointing to the place from which this new birth is generated. This experience of being born again, and born from above, is engineered by God, and it includes both personal conversion and a personal awareness of the extraordinary gifts of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. To be "born of the Spirit" means to say a human "yes" to the presence and the power of God in Christ, and to accept his offer of forgiveness and new life, but it also means to acknowledge that God's presence and power are beyond our human understanding or control.

Jesus goes on to proclaim the reason that it is now possible to come to God—in spite of all of our sins and failings—and how we are able to receive the gift of new life. We even have his wonderful words recorded by St. John as Jesus announces: “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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order to save it.”

Nicodemus is such an ambiguous figure today in John's gospel, in part because he is so typically human. Like most of us, he is looking for salvation by trying several different strategies. John's gospel carefully notes the fact that Nicodemus' visit to Jesus occurred at night, suggesting a secretive, clandestine quality to the encounter. It is not hard to imagine that: as a Pharisee, as a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus feared he might jeopardize his own standing among those who had the "right stuff," of his day, the elite of the first century, if he were seen seriously conversing with Jesus in broad daylight.

And yet, the unmet yearnings in Nicodemus' soul, the truth and power he felt from Jesus and his message, pulled Nicodemus toward faith. But his own investment in a world of status and status quo, coupled with an outright "fear of the Jews, kept him from fully embracing the gospel that Jesus had shared with him, until after Jesus had died on the cross. Later in John's Gospel, we find him helping Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus for his burial. Perhaps as the two of them wrapped his body with spices, linen, and as they laid him in the tomb, Nicodemus may have remembered Jesus words, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

That is the amazing Good News of the Gospel. It is life changing information that we can share with our friends and neighbors, with a world that desperately needs a word of hope and healing. The cross reminds us that God does not desire anyone to be condemned or separated from God's love. On the contrary, God desires that everyone of us experience the fullness of life and salvation that he offers to us through Jesus.

A group of Christian women from Cameroon, united in their concern for the suffering of their African continent decided to do something practical in response. Every Monday they stopped their everyday activities at a fixed time, and lit candles which bore the name of each country in conflict for which they had decided to pray. They put on a red scarf with blue trimming. Red symbolized blood, and blue stood for peace and hope. They turned their minds and their hearts to God and asked for God's mercy and intercession that the conflict and violence of war would be transformed into peace, praying for human pain and suffering to be alleviated.

When a local bishop heard about the ecumenical nature of the prayers and social action among these women from several different Christian churches, he

sought to discourage contact between them. He asked them if they were not aware of the differences between their churches. One of the women replied: “Bishop, we are aware of these differences, but we are also aware of the importance of life, and that Jesus came so that ALL might live.”

John 3:16 is at the heart of the Christian message. God’s love is not just for a chosen few, but it is for the whole human race, for all of creation. The Good News of the Gospel is about life, not death. About inclusion, not discrimination. About love, not hate. About hope, not despair. About forgiveness, not judgement. About peace, not war. And as scripture suggests, we believe in a God who is making all things new.

So, when we tell ourselves, “things can never change.” Or “that will never happen,” we presume too much or believe too little. In Jesus Christ, God tenders all of our conclusions as premature, and all of our inevitabilities as simply bad faith. For in Christ, God opens closed doors, brings resurrection, reclaims the lost, changes the unchangeable, and reveals that in Him the Impossible becomes possible. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.