

Sunday, June 3, 2012: Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

These Trinity Sunday texts show God moving graciously—and persistently—toward people while they struggle to stay on their feet.

by [Chris Blumhofer](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue

Shortly after my daughter was born last summer, a friend gave my wife and me a bit of unsolicited wisdom: “God gives us children to remind us that we are not in control.” Sage advice, to be sure. But, unlike most advice that new parents receive, this adage was accompanied not with a sentimental smile but with an off-putting laugh—the kind of chuckle usually reserved for people who have chosen to learn something the hard way.

We soon found out why. The arrival of our firstborn child brought amazing experiences of delight and love into our home. But our daughter’s arrival also put life into disarray. We quickly learned that our daughter did not share her parents’ priorities—or our desire for full nights of sleep. There was a stretch last fall when someone in our house was awake every hour of the day. In those weeks, and in moments of exhaustion since then, my wife and I have begun to ask each other the same question, often with a tired smile on our faces: “Is this really happening?”

There have been glimpses of our pre-parent days in the midst of the changes: an occasional phone call from a friend that lasts late into the night, or the rare days in which the sound of an alarm clock and not our daughter stirs us from sleep. For the most part, however, the last year has been taken up with learning how to live as a person who has been given a good gift—but also a gift that has destabilized most of what ordered life a year ago.

We have found in this tumultuous season of life something that God’s people often recognize in such times: God’s grace works with a peculiar power through life’s disorienting moments. Sometimes the disorientation itself is an act of God’s mercy and grace.

These Trinity Sunday texts show God moving graciously—and persistently—toward his people while they struggle to stay on their feet. In Isaiah 6, the tribe of Judah is approaching a political and military disaster, and in the face of the impending crisis God sees fit to commission a new prophet and promise his people a future through a holy seed. In Romans 8, Paul encourages believers by teaching them that the Holy Spirit has entered into their lives and brought them out of slavery to sin and into a new way of living—one marked by Spirit-empowered freedom to love and obey the Lord. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Spirit brings about a new birth in men and women by revealing the identity of the Son, and that the Father’s love for the cosmos (nothing less!) is the catalyst for all the saving acts of God.

The well-known encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus captures the grace that can accompany disorientation. John 3:16 records a classic summary of the Good News, one that plays an important role in evangelism, but the conversation that leads up to it is intentionally puzzling. Jesus comes across as purposefully elusive: he switches subjects quickly. He plays with words. The Pharisee had come with talking points, but they are quickly thrown out as Jesus leads him into unexpected topics. Nicodemus strives to keep up but soon surrenders. The dialogue becomes a monologue. Jesus is not trying to accommodate Nicodemus; he is trying to unsettle him.

And Jesus succeeds. Before he knows it, Nicodemus—the teacher—takes the place of the student; the examiner becomes the examined.

Jesus’ words take aim at Nicodemus’s place in God’s kingdom. He wants Nicodemus to give up the security that was his by birth: being born of a Jewish mother offers no privilege in the kingdom that Jesus announces. Water and Spirit now serve as the birthmarks of those who belong to this family. While he is calling him to be born again, Jesus is also calling Nicodemus to risk his life. This Pharisee is, after all, a leader of those who are seeking Jesus’ life. When he says, “You must be born again,” Jesus calls one of his antagonists to cross over from being a ruler of the Jews to being a member of the persecuted minority that orders its life by the belief that God’s love for the world shows itself in the life, death and resurrection of his son. Jesus uses the plural you (“y’all”), and thus makes his appeal not only to Nicodemus but to all the men and women he represents.

Nicodemus must have been knocked off his balance by Jesus’ words. Both of his replies to Jesus express the heart of a man straining to keep up: “How can these

things be?” But his disorientation is also the beginning of his conversion—one that eventually leads Nicodemus to speak out for Jesus among his peers (John 7) and to minister to Jesus at the tomb (John 19). Nicodemus does not know it at the time, but as he stumbles through this conversation, he is being reoriented and taking the first steps down the path of abundant life.

In his theology of pastoral ministry, Will Willimon describes evangelism as “an assault, a rearrangement, a reconfiguration, a re-creation of a world.” In that way of thinking about an encounter with the Good News, our ability to recognize God’s grace comes at precisely the moment that God begins disrupting a whole way of life. Jesus is after such disruption and the reorientation it leads to. He wants Nicodemus—and us—to leave behind one set of bearings and to take on an entirely new set. The father’s love calls for it. The Spirit makes surrender to this new way of life possible.

How do we respond to the interruptions that God places in our lives? Do we resist all change and try desperately to retain the status quo? Or do we allow his gifts to reorient us?

Perhaps in moments of weariness we may join with Nicodemus—or a tired new dad—and ask, “How can this be?” When we find such words on our lips, perhaps we might pause to reflect on God’s presence in our lives. It would fit the character of our triune God to reveal himself at precisely the times in which we are keenly aware of our lack of control—even when such moments occur during sleepless nights spent caring for ones we love.