

## **Do Not Be Astonished! Give Thanks for the Gifts**

Last week, while I was waiting to have my car serviced after two flat tires, I took several Uber rides. If you have ever taken Uber, you are likely familiar with the many messages that they send as the arrangements are made and the driver approaches your location.

This time, in addition to all the normal messages reminding me to check that the driver and car were the actual ones assigned for my ride there was a reminder each time to wear a seatbelt even if I was sitting in the back seat.

Now, seat belts have been mandatory in Ontario since 1 January 1976. For me, it is second nature to buckle up when I sit in a car, so I was a little surprised by the persistent reminders.

We only have to look around us. Warnings are posted everywhere. We are cautioned about our use of alcohol and cigarettes; to stay away from thin ice, deep water, and downed hydro lines, and the important one that we may see at the zoo "Please do not feed fingers to the animals."

That said, I think that today's gospel reading should have come with a warning label attached to it:

Warning! Holy Spirit on the move."

and the fine print should say:

"The Holy Spirit may blow in when you least expect it.

Do not be surprised by the re-arrangement of life."

Jesus has had a busy day. He was in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Having entered the temple and found it to be a marketplace, Jesus overturned the tables of the vendors and money changers, reportedly making a mess and causing a lot of confusion. When questioned about his authority for doing this, Jesus responds, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Now Jesus was talking about his body, but the people and authorities heard it as destroying the temple that had taken 46 years to re-build. Undoubtedly, he and his group of followers have come to the attention of the priests, scribes and Pharisees.

It is now evening. Jesus is resting. It may be the same day or a few days later, when all the hoopla and excitement had died down. By now Jesus' name will have spread to all the temple leadership, and he is not on their most-favoured list.

Nicodemus has come to visit; he is a Pharisee and leader in the community. He will have heard what had happened in the temple.

As we listen into the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus it has the feeling of walking into a workplace debate that is using a lot of jargon. The words are all there but the conversation does not flow in any expected way.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'" (v7)

No one can enter the kingdom of heaven without letting the Holy Spirit into their lives without being born from above.

Nicodemus stammers out some questions, having taken Jesus' comment much to literally that he must be born again. It is a recipe for misunderstanding.

Do not be astonished!

We think we know how life is ordered, how it is organized, what comes first, and what comes next. That it is arranged just so.

And then Jesus says, "You must be born from above." You must be born anew.

It is about starting again with the Holy Spirit as your guide.

Starting again is like repenting, it is turning and facing towards God.

Jesus continues, "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." (v8)

We are all familiar with strong winds blowing around, whether it is the neatly raked-up piled leaves in the fall or the contents of the garbage bin that it picks up and spreads down the street, or whipping up the snow to make driving difficult. It will come from all directions and end up in the most unexpected places.

Be warned! Do not be astonished!

"You must be born from above." You must be born anew.

We do not know where the Holy Spirit will blow us, it will show up in new and disturbing places.

Born from above, born anew is not to be confused with being born again as described by some evangelical Christian groups, which is a one-time event which they describe as a singular, decisive act of God that cannot be undone, similar to physical birth, which only happens once.

Born from above is both a wonderful promise and an awful threat of radical renewal. Wonderful and awful because it is so radical.

Wonderful as it is a gift from God, not a choice of ours but a gift from God. Awful as we are not in control.

Do not be astonished! But give thanks for the gift.

As we are born from above, born anew, with the gift of the holy Spirit blowing us into new, unexpected and sometimes disturbing places,  
we are closer to God  
we are closer to the Kingdom of God  
the Holy Spirit shows us the path and leads us in the right way  
the Holy Spirit accompanies us on our journey.

Do not be astonished! But give thanks for the gift.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Readings: John 3:1-17