

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobnier, Illinois
Lent 2A
March 8, 2020
John 3:1-17

Born to Die, Re-born to Live

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." . . . Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:3, 5 ESV)

Dearly beloved of Christ, the only Savior of the world,

Sometimes the Word of God just doesn't make sense. That's what happened to Nicodemus when he came to Jesus that night. Nicodemus says, "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." Good for Nicodemus in coming to Jesus; bad for him for not realizing that the signs Jesus did revealed who He really was. He was ready to confess that Jesus was a godly man, that He had God with Him, but he wasn't ready to confess Jesus as the Son of God or as the Messiah.

So Jesus immediately addresses Nicodemus's unbelief. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." What hard words those were to Nicodemus. After all, he was a descendant of Abraham. He was a Pharisee. He was a ruler of the Jews. In his mind he was already God's child and in the kingdom of God. And yet, Jesus confronts Nicodemus with the startling truth that mere physical descent from Abraham and doing the right things does not bring one into the kingdom of God.

And even after these first words of Jesus, Nicodemus still couldn't make sense of it all. "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" What Jesus said didn't make any sense at all. Nicodemus had no idea what Jesus was talking about. And, if left to ourselves, we wouldn't either.

You see, when we were born into this world, we were born completely contaminated by sin. We were dead, separated from God, and totally outside His kingdom. Not only that, there was no way we could gain entrance. There was nothing we could do to enter the kingdom of God. The flesh would live. The flesh would die. And that would be it. We would end up like the dry bones in the valley of Ezekiel's vision. We would spend eternity in hell, forever separated from God.

But God didn't leave us alone to live a miserable life in sin and to die in it. He didn't leave us to our own devices to wallow in our own spiritual wretchedness with no hope of rescue. Rather, He looked on us with an everlasting love. He was so concerned about us that He sent His only Son to wallow in wretchedness for us by being tempted and by His sufferings and death on the

cross. The Son willingly faced temptation and laid down His life on that cross, bearing our sin and the sin of the whole world. That Son came to save the world from sin and death. There was nothing we could or can do. God did it all - in Jesus.

But the flesh rejects such things because they don't make sense. The flesh wants to believe that we can be good in God's eyes through our own works, and such 'good behavior' then becomes a currency by which we can buy good things from God. But because of the sinful nature of our flesh, we can do nothing that is pleasing to God. Our sinful flesh can only bring forth more sin. For "the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. . . . [And] those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Gal. 5:19-21). The fleshly life can only bring forth more works of the flesh, and so there is no currency by which we can obtain anything good from God. However, don't despair because the God of all grace, mercy, and comfort has fully provided for us in Christ.

So Jesus tells Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom of God is a matter of rebirth, that is, it's a matter of Spirit-generated faith. It's not about being "born again" physically, but being "born from above" spiritually. Thus it's not a matter of what one does. It's not a matter of one's ancestry. It's not a matter of belonging to the right party, religious or otherwise. Rather, to enter the kingdom of God is something that the Holy Spirit does to a person and in a person. The Holy Spirit gives birth to spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit creates spiritual life within us. And you have received this re-birth, this new life, when you were baptized.

Working through the Word of God, the Holy Spirit brings us to a realization of our sinfulness and our separation from God. That Word of the Law leads us to realize our helplessness and lifelessness. Then the Word of the Gospel, that is, the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake, gives us life as it draws us to God. In Holy Baptism, the Spirit effects a new birth in us as our sins are washed away and we are given spiritual life. And none of this is our doing. Such rebirth is passive on our part. The Spirit works and we receive. Just as we had nothing to do with our physical birth, so we have nothing to do with our spiritual birth.

Now none of this makes sense. And yet, by faith we accept it all. Jesus' example of the wind is excellent. "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." We don't understand the wind. We don't know where it starts or where it ends. We don't even know what it really is. But we do know of it. We can hear it as it reverberates in our ears. We can feel it against our skin. We can see its effects as things are blown around. But we still don't understand it. The wind just doesn't make sense, and yet we accept it as a fact of nature.

As the Spirit works in us to bring us to faith and to keep us in faith, we don't understand that either. We don't understand how Baptism creates spiritual life in us, but we believe that it does. Through that blessed Sacrament we are dressed in Christ's righteousness (Gal. 3) and given a good conscience before God (1 Peter 3). Yes, the Holy Spirit connects us to Jesus Christ and

directs us to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. And that's where we find life. For just as the Israelites who were bitten by the serpents lived when they looked to the bronze serpent, so we find life when we look in faith to Jesus on the cross. And how do we do that? By looking at our Baptism and at our Lord's Body and Blood in His Supper. It doesn't make sense, and yet that is the only way we can be saved.

Yes, the Holy Spirit works when and where He pleases. And we see the evidence of His work in the life of Nicodemus. For we find that Nicodemus was born again, born from above. For we read in John 7 that Nicodemus tried to defend Jesus to the chief priests and Pharisees. And in John 19, we read that Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea in burying Jesus. Nicodemus was no longer afraid to openly claim Jesus as his Lord, his Savior. He looked to Jesus on the cross with the faith of a snake-bitten Israelite and he was saved.

Jesus said, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." By the grace of God, this is exactly the birth you have now been given, by the will of the Father, through the death and resurrection of the Son, and by means of the Holy Spirit's gifts. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are the ones Jesus is talking about. Praise be to God who loved the world in such a way that He sent His Son who willingly came and suffered all, even death on the cross, that we might see and enter His Kingdom and live with Him eternally. We were born to die and we have been reborn to live. God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener