

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Lent 2A
March 5, 2023
John 3:1-17

Born Again, Born From Above

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:1-3 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

When Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, he had no idea what was going to happen. He didn't know what he didn't know. Jesus would give him the lesson he needed. How does one enter the kingdom of God? It's not like Nicodemus thought.

Now, Nicodemus was a highly-educated, religious man, a leader of the Jews. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Jesus even calls him "the teacher of Israel," indicating that Nicodemus was highly respected and prominent in that role. Yet Nicodemus doesn't "get it." Not yet. He doesn't know Jesus as he should. He needs a spiritual rebirth to open his eyes, to give him a right understanding and a whole new life.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, presumably so as not to be seen. It might not look so good for a member of the Sanhedrin to visit this controversial figure, Jesus of Nazareth. Nicodemus tells Jesus, "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." Well, that's good as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. Jesus is far more than a rabbi, even an exceptional one who can do some miracles. Nicodemus here is understating who Jesus is. He will need to see more than that, if he is to come into the kingdom of God.

So, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." You know, there are lots of people who will say some nice things about Jesus—what a good teacher He was, what a fine example He is. But if that's as far as they can go, then they have about reached the limit of what human flesh and reason can discern. And that's not enough. You must be born again if you are to recognize who Jesus really is and trust in Him and thus see God's kingdom as you need to see it. You must be born from above—that's another way "born again" can be translated. You must be "born from above," that is, have a heavenly rebirth, in order to recognize the kingdom of heaven in your midst, which is what Jesus brings with his presence.

Jesus' response about being born again puzzles Nicodemus. He doesn't know where Jesus is going with this riddle. So, he replies: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" This stuff sounds like nonsense to Nicodemus. Crazy talk.

But no, Jesus really means what He said. He reiterates and explains what He means: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" To be born again, born from above, is to be born of water and the Spirit. It's a heavenly rebirth, and it involves the use of water, in connection with the Spirit. And that, as you probably realize, is Baptism.

Water and the Spirit, together. That's what happened in the beginning, at Creation. "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,'" etc. Water, the Spirit, the Word—Creation. Likewise, now in the new creation, the spiritual rebirth in Holy Baptism: Water, the Spirit, and the Word. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." (2 Cor. 5:17).

Holy Baptism, instituted by Christ, is the spiritual rebirth of water and the Spirit. St. Paul speaks of it in Titus 3, "[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the

Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:5-6). Did you catch that? “The washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.” “Washing,” water. “Regeneration,” rebirth. “Renewal,” new life. “The Holy Spirit” . . . well, the Holy Spirit. In other words, born again, of water and the Spirit, just like in John. And this is what happens in Holy Baptism.

“Born of water and the Spirit.” We need this new birth to see clearly, to see the kingdom of God come in Christ. Otherwise, our spiritual blindness would keep us in the dark. We need this new birth to enter the kingdom of God. Otherwise, without faith in our Savior Christ, our sins and spiritual deadness would keep us out of God’s kingdom. We need the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to see the light, to have the scales fall from our eyes. We need to receive the righteousness of Christ, the life He won for us, to raise us from death to life.

Our first birth is not enough. This is why Jesus says in our text, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” “Flesh” in this sense means our fallen sinful nature, which we inherited from Adam and was passed down to us. Adam, by his desire to be independent of God, fell into sin. He was placed under the curse of death, driven from the garden, and cut off from the tree of life. That’s you and me. We all share in this sinful Adamic nature. Flesh gives birth to flesh. And flesh can only take you so far. By your first birth, you cannot rise above the level of your father Adam.

Listen to how the Bible describes our natural state. “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Eph. 2:1-3).

According to the flesh, we were “by nature children of wrath.” God’s wrath. And that’s not good. Flesh gives birth to flesh. That’s as far as you can go, that’s as high as you can rise, by your birth according to the flesh. You need a different kind of birth.

And you don’t give birth to yourself. No, this is a matter of being born of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives you this new birth. You don’t do it. He does. In John 1, we read, “To all who did receive him,” that is, Christ, “who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13). God gives you the new birth. It’s not your decision or your will that does it. It’s God giving you the new birth, making you His child, giving you the gift of faith.

Faith in Christ. Faith is to receive Christ, to believe in His name. For Jesus Christ is the only Savior from sin. As our text says: “So must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Yes, God the Father loved us in such a way that He sent His Son into the world. God the Son, Christ Jesus, then was lifted up on the cross, so that you and I would not perish in our sins. Through Christ, through His sacrifice in our place on the cross, our sins are forgiven. Believing in Christ, trusting in Him, we receive that forgiveness, and so we have eternal life.

The Holy Spirit brings you those benefits that Christ won for you on the cross: forgiveness, life, eternal salvation. The Spirit enables you to receive and take hold of those benefits by faith. The Holy Spirit quickens you, brings you from death to life, through the gospel. The word of God in and with the water is the power in Holy Baptism. It makes Baptism the life-giving sacrament that it is. The Holy Spirit uses this sacrament to bring you to faith and raise you to new life. Thus, Baptism is the new birth, your spiritual re-birthday.

If you’ve been baptized, if you’ve been born of the water and the Spirit, if you’re trusting in Christ your Savior, then you are part of God’s family, the Church. You are God’s child. He is your kind and loving heavenly Father. Christ Jesus is the Savior you know and trust. All your sins have been washed away. You are joined to Jesus and His resurrection. The Holy Spirit has given you the gift of faith,

through the Word. The Spirit will keep you in this faith, and keep you growing as Christ's disciple, as you continue in the Word. What a joyous, happy day it is, the day of your baptism, with such wonderful, ongoing results! Amen.

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

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener