

THE HOLY TRINITY – JUNE 12, 2022 – JOHN 3:1-17

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ 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." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ 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.

Our society today suffers from a lack of shame, a complete and utter brazenness that seems to fly in the face of the attitude of humility and repentance that the Bible describes as being God-pleasing. The devil seems to have free reign among us, and tempts us to do all sorts of brash and lawless deeds. Human nature has gone from being concerned with the situation of our brother in need, to being selfish and only caring for ourselves. I don't make this charge lightly – it comes from observing the markers of society that surround us. I don't need to get into the details or examples to show that we live in a culture that is far from God, that discounts what He says in His Word, that thinks that people are just fine on their own, without fear and love of God, without shame and sorrow for sin, without a knowledge of the concupiscence of mankind. It's become easy to focus on the symptoms of the problem, without getting to the root cause. Have you ever wondered what's the matter with people that they continue to turn their back on that which is God-pleasing, and act out in anger and rage toward others? It's time for a complete makeover by the Holy Spirit – otherwise, things aren't going to change one iota.

Things weren't all that different in the day of Jesus. Nicodemus, one of the teachers of the Law, came to Jesus by night (so that it wouldn't be discovered that he was approaching the Son of Man for advice – Nicodemus was that conscious of being observed), and talked with Him about His divine powers, His God-given mandate, His authoritative preaching and teaching of the Scriptures. Nicodemus knew that Jesus came from God, because He was different than the other teachers of the Law that had come through the city of Jerusalem. However, because Nicodemus was so steeped in the Law of God, he (like many others) had lost his way – he focused on salvation by the keeping of the Law, and forgot about the promised coming of the Savior, to take away the sins of not having kept the Word of God.

Washing of Regeneration and Renewal by the Holy Spirit – we understand at least the fundamentals of this today, but Nicodemus just didn't get it. That's not necessarily a mark against him – his reluctance to "get it" is completely understandable. Jesus says that Nicodemus, and all sinful

mankind, must be “born again”. What did He mean by being born again? Is that even possible? It’s actually biologically impossible!

The reason that Jesus uses this terminology – we get a new start in Baptism. The Old Man (the sinful nature of man) drowns and dies – while it doesn’t go away, at least not until the Last Day, the Holy Spirit gradually and daily makes us more and more into the image that God wanted us to have in the beginning – the crown of His creation, doing good works that He has set out for us to do. The New Man (the Godly nature of man) is born on the day of our Baptism – we are given the gift of faith, we have our sins washed away through the saving bath of Baptism. That’s the new start! It doesn’t depend upon us, or how sincere we are in wanting to “start over”, or whether or not we actually intend to change. We probably won’t, at least not completely. The only way to be free from the sinful nature is to pass from this world into the world to come in heaven. However, once we’ve been given the mark of the Holy Cross on our forehead and upon our heart, we are marked as one who has been redeemed by Christ the crucified. That’s a complete and utter change, from being enemies of God to being His friends. In the same way that circumcision was the mark of God’s people when they were wandering in the desert, so baptism is the mark of God’s people in the New Testament era. Baptism fulfills the promise given in circumcision. While circumcision pointed ahead to the Messianic coming of Christ, Baptism gives new birth because of that promise.

Jesus chides Nicodemus a little for not understanding this at all – and maybe Nicodemus deserved it a little bit. After all, he was a teacher of Israel, which meant that he should have been familiar with the Old Testament prophesies about the Savior coming, and removing the sins of the world with His life, death, and resurrection. Can you imagine what you’d be thinking if you have a mechanic that doesn’t know what’s where under the hood of the car? If he does what I do when I open the hood of a car – yep, there’s an engine in there; I don’t have a clue what does what, but I’m confident all the parts are there – somewhere! What would you think of an auto technician that knows that there’s

something important there, but hasn't yet explored it to know where everything is? It's one thing for a pastor to be clueless; it's another for a professional to be stumped so easily. That's the disappointment and frustration that Jesu expresses in our passage. However, we know that this easily happened – it had been so long since God gave the promise to His people that He would send the Savior, that it would be perfectly natural for the people, including the teachers and leaders, to give up hope – to think that God changed His mind, or that there was some other reason that the promise wasn't going to be fulfilled.

The promise of God attached to Baptism is why we dwell on it so much today in the church – it's the Word with wheels, so to speak. Water and the Word – God combines this common element with His Word, and does great things – He does this a lot – think of the Lord's Supper, the Absolution, and other miracles that He performed in His earthly ministry. This is how we are reassured of God's love and provision for us – we know that He has named you as His child, because you are marked with the seal of the cross of Christ, that you have been given faith in Christ the Redeemer from sin, that you have been entered into the Lamb's Book of Life. Your sins are washed away; they are removed from you as far as the East is from the West. And, you're enabled to live a new life because you've been saturated in the waters of Baptism. You are given the ability to live a life of daily confession and forgiveness, because you are God's child. That's a powerful, life-long blessing and reassurance, isn't it?

Jesus reminds Nicodemus about His provision throughout the Old Testament – and points ahead to His upcoming Passion, death, and resurrection. The snake on the pole – after God punished them for their disobedience to His Word, one of the many times that this happened during their desert sojourn, He developed the plan to save them from the snake bites. God had Moses put a serpent on a pole, and when the people looked at it, they would be delivered from their snake bites, and live. Envision the optics here a little bit – the serpent on the pole, the cross of Christ, with the body of Christ displayed on it – there's certainly a correlation here, if not a close similarity. God was pointing ahead to the One Who

was pierced for the sins of the people when He had Moses pierce the serpent and place it atop the pole. It was no mistake!

I'm sure there was also an allusion to the stomping of the serpent by the foot of the Savior in Genesis chapter 3 – even though satan was able to bruise the Savior, Jesus, the seed of Eve, was able to triumph over the devil by crushing his head. With all of the options in the world to choose from, to injure and kill the people, God chose a poisonous snake. Was that a coincidence? Or, are we to read into this that the snake was to remind them of satan's presence in their midst? The evil one was the cause of sin, the tempter of Adam and Eve, who have handed to us this corrupt world. Now we live in a world that was once "very good" in the eyes of God, to the corruption in which man rapidly found himself. The devil thought he was able to triumph, and take God's people away from Him. But, the evil one found himself impaled upon a pole, defeated by God's servant, Moses, temporarily in the desert, but permanently on the Last Day.

We look to Jesus, crucified on the cross, but risen from the dead on the Third Day, to heal us from the smiting bites of satan. The only way for us to be saved, for us to be removed from this vale of tears to Jesus Himself in heaven, is through the cross of Christ. We are made partakers in the benefits of the cross through the means that God has set up, namely, His Word and His Sacraments.

God the Father, through the actions of God the Son, by the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, has but one goal. He desires nothing more, nothing less, than to spend eternity with us being restored as the apple of His eye, the crown of His creation. Even though the devil messed things up completely, and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden followed in his sway, God was not defeated. He did everything that was necessary to save us from our many sins.

The verse that most of us know by heart comes from this passage of John's Gospel. It's even been called "the Bible in a nutshell." Verse 16 – *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* However, if you read the rest of

the passage, you get a glimpse into the way in which God causes this change to happen. He uses Baptism, the work of the Holy Spirit, to work through means to accomplish His goals. You see, God doesn't want anyone, except the devil and his evil angels, to inhabit the hell of fire. He created it for those evil angels that rebelled against Him, because there cannot be sin in His perfect presence of heaven. But, He loves us so much that He doesn't want us to go there, too. He does whatever is necessary to convert our hearts of stone toward faith in God. He washes away our sins, causes us to be "reborn" (which biologically doesn't make sense, but unlike Nicodemus in his moment of confusion, we're given the gift of understanding), through water and the Spirit, and ushers us into the kingdom of heaven, by the Spirit's work, and not ours.

On this Trinity Sunday, the day when we especially confess the Athanasian Creed, which explains the doctrines of the Trinity and the Two Natures of Christ in detail yet understandably, it's not surprising that those who put together the historic Lectionary give us this passage from John's Gospel to consider. We see here that the will of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are completely and totally united. The Triune God wants every one of us to be saved from our sins, our greatest problem, the cause of our eternal condemnation if not dealt with. He gives us the washing of renewal and rebirth by the Holy Spirit, not by reentering our mother's body, but being reborn in a new way. We gain a new start in life, aimed toward eternal life, not just the existence in this physical world for a short time indeed.

What a marvel that the Holy Spirit makes this saving, compassionate, gracious Christ Jesus known to us. He then raises us from our graves of sin to be at home with the Father in heaven. The Holy Spirit does all this, because it's His role in the economy of the Trinity to do so. The Triune God has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.