

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Holy Trinity – May 26, 2024
John 3:1-17 – God Makes You Holy
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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.’”

A teacher come from God. A miracle worker. That’s what Nicodemus thought of Jesus. And really, that’s what almost everyone today thinks of Jesus. A teacher from God. Nothing more.

It’s true that Jesus is our teacher. It’s true that he has come from God, that God is with him. But he is also much more.

And yet, in his humility, Jesus does not try to correct Nicodemus. Jesus doesn’t say, “Nicodemus, I am much greater than a mere teacher sent from God.” Because he never seeks his own glory. He never tries to magnify himself. He waits for the Father to glorify him.

On the other hand, Jesus does take control of the conversation. He ignores whatever it was that Nicodemus was trying to say. Instead, he starts talking about what Nicodemus actually needs to hear. Jesus answered him, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

That seems totally out of left field. But okay Jesus, we know you are a wise teacher come from God. So we’ll try to follow along with what you’re saying.

Born again. Nicodemus had no idea what Jesus meant, but we know. Born again is not some vague label for a really sincere Christian. It’s not making some deep personal commitment to Jesus or receiving manifestations of the Spirit like speaking in tongues. Born again just means baptized. Born from above, heavenly rebirth by water and the Spirit.

Okay. So you must be born again, Nicodemus. Get baptized, in order to see the kingdom of God. Be born of water and the Spirit, with water poured over you to wash you in the Holy Spirit. Because just as Jesus is much more than a mere teacher sent from God, water combined with his word is much more than plain water. It is a lifegiving water, rich in grace, and a washing of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Baptism recreates you. It makes you a child of the King, to see his kingdom, the news heaven and the new earth.

But it gets better. To see the kingdom of God is to see Jesus, the King, with eyes of faith. It’s to recognize him as more than a mere teacher sent from God. Seeing his kingdom is recognizing Jesus as the Lord of Hosts himself. But unless you are born again, unless you receive the Holy Spirit through baptism, unless you have faith, you cannot see anything in Jesus but a mere man. You cannot see the kingdom of God.

Yet Nicodemus does not see. He asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus has to patiently explain, “Amen, amen, 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.’ 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.”

If you are born from below, from the sinful flesh, with blind eyes and no faith, then the Holy Spirit is as obscure to you as the invisible wind. You have no idea where the Holy Spirit comes from or where he is going. You have no idea what he is doing. But if you are born from above through the Spirit, your eyes will be opened to see. You will understand the Spirit by faith, you’ll know his purpose. You’ll know where he comes from and where he is going. He comes from the Father, like me, Jesus. He has come to you, in baptism, to lead you back to his source. Now he is bringing you to the cross to see me, and by faith in me, he will lead you into communion with the Father himself.

But Nicodemus did not grasp these things. Nicodemus said, “How can these things be?” And Jesus answered, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Amen, amen, 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.”

We speak, says Jesus. We bear witness. The divine We. The Father and the Spirit and myself. We declare the heavenly things to you. Just as we made you in our image on the sixth day, just as we breathed into your nostrils the breath of life, now we declare the heavenly things to you.

So hear now the heavenly things. Things no mere teacher from God could ever tell you. Things into which the angels long to look. Things hidden from the beginning of time, known only to us, to myself and the Spirit and my Father. Things that now, I have come down from my heavenly throne to make known to you:

“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, 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.”

These are the heavenly things. This is why the Trinity matters. Why it matters that Jesus is more than a teacher sent from God. Why you must see him as the true Son, God the Word, who was with God in the beginning, who was God. If he were not God, his death on the cross would be worthless. Then whoever believes in him would not have everlasting life at all, but would surely perish.

Because no one but God himself could die as a substitute for the world. Only perfect God could complete his own perfect Law. No sinful human being is sufficient, that much is obvious. But not even a holy angel can accomplish such a thing. For an angel may be holy, but no angel can give his holiness to someone else.

Only God can give his holiness to another. Only touching God himself makes anything holy.

When Isaiah saw the holy God, sitting high and lifted up in the year that King Uzziah died, he was terrified, he was undone. “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” We cannot stand in the presence of the holy God. His holiness destroys sin.

But the Holy, Holy, Holy, glorious Lord of Hosts chose not to consume Isaiah or destroy him. Just as he chose not to destroy foolish Nicodemus, or you and me. He patiently spares and redeems us. The living God became man. He was high and lifted up on the throne of the cross to atone for Isaiah’s sin. He touched Isaiah with his burning holiness, to destroy his sin and make him pure. So God also makes you holy by touching you with his holiness. The holy God himself touched your humanity. He took on human flesh and blood, to suffer and die. And now he touches you personally in the sacraments, in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, that whoever believes in him might have everlasting life.

Just as the burning coal from heavenly altar purified Isaiah, the holy things of God purify you.

The holy Son of God was lifted up on the cross to pour out his blood as your sacrifice, to atone for the sin of the world. And now the holy Son sanctifies you by the water by his word. He sends the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, to make you holy. He touches you in baptism, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He destroys your sinful nature, to recreate you. He puts your old sinful nature to death and raises you up daily in the forgiveness of sins.

And in a few minutes, God will touch your mouth with a burning coal from the heavenly altar, a piece of his own sacrifice, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This burning coal is the body of God himself, to purify you. “Behold, this has touched your lips,” – this wafer and this wine – “Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

By touching you with these things, God makes you holy, to stand before his throne. Believe in him, the only-begotten Son, who gave himself for the life of the world. Whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.