

## BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT

John 3:1-17

The Holy Trinity (Series B)

May 27, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for The Holy Trinity comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 17. It is on page 751 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus tells a grown man to do something impossible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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."

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> 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?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> 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."

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> 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."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

---

This is one of those texts that really can't be covered in one sermon, not if you want to do the passage justice and not overwhelm a congregation. So I'm going to pick one part.

During the season of Lent we covered the whole thing about the snake on a pole and how this is a picture of how God loved the world. It goes back to this Old Testament plague that came upon the Israelites because of their disobedience. They were being bitten by fiery serpents and dying. So when they cried out to God, God prescribed a really strange cure. They

were to make a graven image of a snake, place it on a pole, and everyone who looked at it would live. It worked, but it was really odd and mysterious. And I suppose it remained that way for about 1,400 years until Jesus came along and taught us that it was a prophecy of himself. It was a picture of how God would love the world by sending his own Son in the image of the curse—he was a condemned criminal, hung up on a pole to die—so that everyone who looks to him in faith will live forever. Instead of Jesus appearing as a virtuous hero, he saved us by taking the form of a pathetic criminal. So this snake is the comparison to how God loved the world. **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** Jesus bore our curse of sin and death, and in this he took the very appearance of evil, so he is compared to a snake on a pole. If you don’t quite get it, or if you missed that Sunday, you can find that sermon on the website. And since we covered it a few months ago during Lent, that’s all I’m going to give you today regarding the snake on a pole and John 3:16. Instead we’re going to focus our attention on the first half of this gospel lesson.

---

*You must be born again.* Now what does that mean? Sometimes we hear other Christians talk about being “born again.” What do they mean by that? It seems to me—and I admit this is a generalization—it seems to me that they are usually talking about some experience you have where you suddenly get really serious about this whole Christianity thing. Beforehand, you either weren’t a Christian or you were just kind of a nominal Christian. If pressed on it you might have said that you believe in Jesus, but you just weren’t that serious about it. Then something happens. You hear a really inspiring preacher, or you pray a certain prayer, and then everything changes. You made a decision to follow Jesus, and you *done* got born again. That—it seems to me—is what Christians usually mean when they talk about being born again. But is that what Jesus means by it? When we look at what Jesus actually says about how a person is born again, the answer is pretty clearly, “No.” So what does Jesus mean?

Let’s look at this, because it’s really important. It’s so important that Jesus says, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”** (3:3). That sounds pretty serious. Unless you are born again, you will never see, taste, experience, or enter heaven. Jesus ties heaven and eternal life to this thing of being born again. So what does it mean?

---

Part of the answer has to do with Nicodemus and his natural birth as a Jew.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. That means that most of his colleagues were not very excited about Jesus. They saw Jesus as a threat to their power and influence. But Nicodemus was a bit more open-minded. He was intrigued. So he wanted to talk to Jesus, but it seems like he didn’t want to be seen talking to Jesus, so he came at night.

First Nicodemus tries to butter Jesus up, or at least he wants Jesus to know that he comes on friendly terms. So he flatters him, and he admits what the other Pharisees and rulers were unwilling to admit, at least publicly. He 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” (3:2).

But Jesus doesn’t really care about the compliment. He answers, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** Now this seems like an odd answer. Nothing in what Nicodemus said prompts Jesus to say this. It’s kind of like if you say,

“Good morning pastor,” and I say, “The Twins could really use some help on offense.” Apparently I’m not interested in talking about what you want to talk about.

But there is a reason Jesus said this to Nicodemus. Being a member of the Pharisees, Nicodemus would have valued his natural birth as a Jew. To the Pharisees, being born a Jew guaranteed a person a place in the kingdom of God, or it was at least a good start. But this idea is wrong. It wasn’t true in the Old Testament, and it’s still not true in the New. Being a child of Abraham means nothing if you are not also a child of God.

So there is another kind of birth. **“Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** This seems like such an odd thing to say. *Be born again? What in the world are you talking about, Jesus?* “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (3:4) Naturally, a person can be born only once, and every mother in the world is very thankful for this; once per child is plenty. The only human beings capable of being born are fetuses. Once you’re out, you’re out; that’s just the way it is. And to speak of it any other way is just nonsense. But Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again.

So how can this happen? Jesus goes on to explain, **“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.”** (3:5-6) So Jesus is talking about a different kind of birth. It is from the Spirit instead of the flesh. But that does not mean it isn’t physical. It is physical, because it’s from water too. It is a new birth by water and the Spirit. It is not from the water only, and it is not from the Spirit only. It is by water and the Spirit, for the water is the means the Spirit uses to accomplish this new birth. And I hope by now you realize we are talking about Baptism. The Holy Spirit works through the water in order to birth us anew.

---

Now, if you’re somewhat familiar with the beliefs of other Christians, you might not be surprised to hear that not all Christians accept that Jesus is talking about Baptism here. That’s because many Christians do not believe the Holy Spirit uses Baptism to forgive sins and create new life. They consider Baptism to be merely a symbol. They call it “an outward sign of an inward change.” But part of the problem is that the Bible never speaks of Baptism in those terms. The other part of the problem is that you have to come up with some other explanation for what water Jesus is talking about here. So some of them will say that “water” and “Spirit” refer to the two different births. They’ll say that “water” refers to the amniotic fluid of natural birth, and “Spirit” refers to the second birth. It’s an odd way to talk about natural birth, but, beyond that, the grammar does not allow for that move. And this is kind of technical, but you’re smart people, so try to stay with me. The grammar does not allow for **“water and the Spirit”** to be separated into two different births. This sort of shows up in English. Jesus says, **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit ...”** He doesn’t say, “Unless one is *first* born of water and *then* born of the Spirit ...” There’s one verb—“born”—and one preposition—“of.” This means that **“water and the Spirit”** are joined together. They can’t be separated. In the next verse, when Jesus says, **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,”** he makes a clear distinction between the two births. Both the verb—“born”—and the preposition—“of”—are repeated. That makes flesh and Spirit two different births. But when Jesus talks about “water and the Spirit,” he connects them into one birth. And this shows up

fairly well in English, but it's even clearer and the rule is even more firm in Greek. According to the grammar, it's just not possible for "water and the Spirit" to refer to two different births. They both refer to the new birth.

Now I know that was kind of technical, but when the plain meaning of language comes under attack, we need to stand up for it. So it's because of the grammar that we insist Jesus is talking about Baptism. It also fits the historical context. Even though Jesus had not yet commanded his disciples to go and baptize (Matt. 28:19), Jesus himself had already been baptized by John the Baptizer (Matt. 3:13f; Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21), and the Pharisees were well-acquainted with John and his baptizing ministry (Matt. 3:7). John had also been preaching about how the Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). So Nicodemus would have been familiar with this whole Baptism thing as well as John's teaching that the Christ's Baptism would include the Holy Spirit. So when Jesus tells Nicodemus about being "born of water and the Spirit," it would have been quite natural for him to understand that Jesus was talking about Baptism.

So if anyone ever asks you, "Have you been born again?" The correct answer is, "Why, yes; I am baptized." Then you will see that sometimes the correct answer absolutely befuddles a person. That's because most of the people who will ask you if you've been born again would be the very same people who deny that Baptism is the new birth.

And we can actually understand part of their concern. They don't want people to think that, just because they are baptized, they are good to go and don't need to give the Christian faith another thought. There's a danger that we might think of Baptism as an irrevocable ticket to heaven. Someone is baptized as a child, but then they walk away from the faith. They no longer confess Jesus as the Christ, and they live as if God doesn't exist. They say, "Oh, I'm baptized, so I'm fine." We share the same concern. This is a wrong understanding of Baptism.

But the correction is not to deny that baptism is the new birth. The correction is to teach more accurately what Baptism is and does. Baptism creates new life. It is the new birth. And that's exactly how we should think of it—as a new birth. So we compare it to human birth. After all, this is the comparison Jesus gives us. What do newborn humans need from their parents? Everything! They need food, clothing, shelter, love, protection, and instruction as they grow up. And the new birth is the same way. A baptized Christian needs instruction in the Christian faith, a godly example to follow, and prayer. If these things are neglected, the same thing will happen as if you don't feed a baby. Sooner or later, this new life will die. So we don't think of Baptism as an irrevocable ticket to heaven. We think of it as a new life that needs to be nourished. So we understand the concern of our Christian friends, but we insist, based on what Jesus taught, that Baptism is the new birth.

And I suppose the reason you probably don't hear Lutherans ask you if you've been born again is simply because if we want to know if a person has been baptized, we say, "Have you been baptized?" We could ask, "Have you been born again?" But it means the exact same thing as, "Have you been baptized?" And we tend to lean toward the more clear language, even though both terms are perfectly acceptable.

---

Now why am I telling you all this? Am I trying to tear down other Christians so that we can boast in our good doctrine? I hope not. That's not what good doctrine is for. I'm telling you this because good doctrine matters, and if you talk about the Christian faith with your friends and

family, this is one of those things that will eventually come up. And someday, a random stranger could walk up to you on the street and ask you if you've been born again. And I want you to be able to give the right answer, which is, "Why, yes; I am baptized."

Now this might be kind of scary—it is for me—because I don't really like confrontation, and it seems like it could create a division. But contrary to what you might hear, doctrine does not divide. Good doctrine *unites* Christians. If we just let our doctrinal disagreements fade into the background and never mention them, then we are still divided on doctrine. We're just ignoring the division. But if we can clearly express the biblical doctrine, then we can teach one another and learn from one another and be united in good doctrine. Growing together into the right doctrine is much better than ignoring doctrine. So when someone asks us, "Have you been born again?" we should say, "Yes; I am baptized," and we should be prepared to open our Bibles to John 3 and show them what Jesus says. Maybe they will accept the biblical teaching, maybe they won't, or maybe they will think about it for a while. The potential for greater unity makes it worth it.

But even more important than greater unity is the comfort the biblical doctrine brings. If the new birth comes about by Baptism, then we never have to live with uncertainty of whether or not we have been born again. This new birth—or "Baptism"—is something the Holy Spirit does through the water. The Holy Spirit uses this water to unite us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. Our sin is crucified with Jesus, and a new spirit is brought to life. It is death and a new birth.

It's not because of anything special with the water. It's not because of a pastor's magic touch. And it's not because of anything you have done. This is all the work of the Holy Spirit. In Baptism the Holy Spirit creates new life in you, because you are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now if you are born again, whose child are you? Every child has biological parents. That's just the way it works. You can't be born without a parent. Birth and biological childhood are inseparably joined together. And the same thing is true for the new birth. When you are baptized you are born again as a child of God, and so God the Father becomes your Father. The Holy Spirit uses the water to connect you to Jesus Christ and you become a child of the Father.

That, by the way, is how this fits with Trinity Sunday. Baptism always has to do with the Trinity, because all three persons are involved. The new birth makes us children of God the Father, because we are baptized into the death and resurrection of the Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit is the person who causes this new birth to happen.

---

So you must be born again. You must be born of water and the Spirit. You must be baptized into Jesus Christ. Because the Kingdom of God does not belong to the children of the flesh. It belongs to the children of God. And so God has provided this simple and gracious means for you to be born again as his child—for you to be baptized into Jesus Christ by water and the Spirit. He has prescribed these means so that you might become his child and know that you are his child. And as his child you are promised the greatest inheritance in all of heaven and earth. You are promised everlasting life in his eternal kingdom. Amen.

---

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.