

THE LORD AND GIVER OF LIFE

John 3:1-8

Third Wednesday in Lent

March 19, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 8. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

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."

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

The Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life. This is his unique work. If something is alive, it is because the Holy Spirit made it alive. Whether it's physical or spiritual, if it's alive, the Holy Spirit gave it life. That is his unique work.

We've been talking about the Holy Spirit in this series, but just for a moment we should talk about the Trinity, so that we can see the Holy Spirit's place within the Triune God. There is one God, and God is three persons. Each of the three persons of the Triune God are equal in power, wisdom, majesty, and every divine attribute you can think of. They are each infinite, because that's the nature of God. And yet, they are three distinct persons, and each person has a different function.

It's sometimes interesting to look at the different works of God and see the unique part that each person of the Trinity has in it. Each person of the Trinity has their own special work. It's kind of like they each have a department they oversee. We sometimes refer to God the Father as the Creator, God the Son as the Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit as the Sanctifier or the Comforter. In the opening prayer we typically use on Sundays, we pray, "O Lord, our Maker, Redeemer, and Comforter ..." That's a reference to the Trinity and the unique work each member has within it. But they don't do their work alone.

A good example of this is creation. The creation of the world is, primarily, the work of the Father. But he did not create alone. He said, "Let us make man in *our* image" (Gen. 1:26), so we learn that God is more than one person, and they were all present and active at creation. God the

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Father created everything by speaking. We learn from the first chapter of John that Jesus is that Word which the Father spoke (1:1-3). And in Genesis we see that the Holy Spirit caused that Word to be effective in order to give life. In Hebrew, and the same thing carries over into Greek, the word for “spirit” also means “breath” or “wind” (Hebrew: רוּחַ; Greek: πνεῦμα). The Holy Spirit is the “breath of God.” So think about the way God created man. “The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). That “breath of life” is the Holy Spirit. A little bit later, in Genesis 6, when God saw how wicked man had become, and he resolved to flood the earth, he said, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh” (Gen. 6:3). You put it all together and this is how we see the creation of the world: God the Father spoke. The Word that he spoke is the Son. And the breath that came into every living creature, especially man, is the Holy Spirit.

And today I especially want to focus in on that work of the Holy Spirit. He breathes life into every living creature. Last week we read from Psalm 104, where God says concerning all the creatures of the earth,

These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground (Ps. 104:27-30).

Consider life, just physical life. I mean the animation of physical flesh. Do you ever just stop and ponder the mystery of life? I mean, we don't really understand how life works. Maybe some scientist can kind of explain some of it. Really, they're just observing the fact that life *does* work. But that's not quite the same as explaining *why* it works. And even if we could understand the whole mystery, that would not explain God away; it would only reveal the mystery of how he creates and sustains life. So I marvel at this sometimes. Sometimes I think about it when a car or some other machine breaks down. Man builds these intricate machines. And even when we make parts out of metal, which, when you're holding it in your hand, seems like it should last forever, those metal parts eventually break or rust out. And compare that to your body. Poke your arm. Do it right now. Just poke or pinch yourself. That flesh seems a lot more fragile than a brake caliper or the metal on the side of your car door. But, usually, that car will die before you do. A good car might last for twenty years, but most of that time it's just sitting. Your body is running 24/7. I was curious, so I did some math on how long a car actually runs until it dies. Suppose you get 300,000 miles out of a car. That's a pretty long life for a car. And suppose you average forty miles per hour. That comes to a total operating time of only 313 days. It's even less if you drive faster. So these highly sophisticated machines that we create, with proper maintenance, will run for less than a year in total. And your car, when it stops working, you can just fix it. During its lifetime, a car requires several different transplants, so to speak. Now compare that to a human body, which is exponentially more complex than a car. And it seems way more fragile. And a human body has certain vital organs, that, if they stop, you just die. You can't just park it in the garage and fix it later. And, yet, you might live for eighty, ninety, or even a hundred years. From a physical point of view, I don't understand how that can be. We all know that many lives are

tragically cut short long before that. But for any of us to even be alive is a mystery. Why doesn't my heart just stop at any random moment? Why is it, that a sperm and an egg can come together and create a new life? And why is it, that it grows and lives? Scientists try to explain it. And that's good. We should want to understand it. But all science can really do is observe that life happens. There's something about the how and the why that is beyond us. That's what I mean by the mystery of life.

The answer is the Holy Spirit. He is the Lord and Giver of Life. This is true for physical life. If we could see behind physical life, and see what really holds life together, we would see the Holy Spirit.

And it's also true for spiritual life. Scripture has even more to say about the Holy Spirit giving spiritual life.

There is also a mystery here. Why am I a Christian? There are several answers to that. I could say, "Because Jesus died and rose again, and the evidence in favor of his resurrection is overwhelming. Therefore, he must be God." That's the rational answer. I could also say, "Because my parents raised me to be a Christian." That's also true, as it is for many of us, and it's not a bad answer. The world might scoff at that as being closed-minded or not based on hard evidence. But that's not actually true. If parents know something to be good and true, they should teach it to their children. If my parents know that Jesus is Lord, it would be terrible for them to leave me to discover my own path. So that's the practical answer: I'm a Christian because my parents raised me to be one. But here is the ultimate answer, the spiritual answer: "Because the Holy Spirit raised me to life." That, ultimately, is why I am a Christian. That's why any Christian has faith. It's not because we reasoned our way into, although we might feel like we did. And it's not really because our parents made us this way. Ultimately, it's because we were born from above by the Holy Spirit.

In the gospel lesson from John 3, Jesus attributes this work to the Holy Spirit. "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). "Water and the Spirit": he's talking about Baptism, of course. It's a new birth. This is the passage where we get the phrase "born again."

Some of our evangelical friends make a really big deal about this, but they misunderstand it. One well-known pastor even wrote a book called *How to Be Born Again* (Billy Graham). Sadly, he did not recognize that the answer is simply, "Be baptized." What's worse, he taught it as something that man can achieve, not that he said it's all man's work, but something that we achieve with the help of the Holy Spirit. But just consider the phrase, "Born again." Writing a how-to book about that makes as much sense as writing a book for babies in the womb. *Your mom is there to help; she'll push you along. But this is really something for you to achieve, little one.*

So if someone ever asks you, "Are you born again?" consider this answer: "Yes; I am baptized." And see if they can handle such a biblical response. I have to confess to you, though, that I chickened out when I had a shot at this. Someone said to me, "I know that you go to church, and I know that you call yourself a Christian, but I really want to make sure. Are you born again?" And the words ran through my mind, *Yes, I am baptized*, but I really didn't want to have an argument with that person at that time, so the only word I said was, "Yes," which is still true.

But consider the way Jesus speaks of being born again. It's the Holy Spirit's work, 100%. And it's mysterious. We know something about it. Jesus ties it to Baptism. But that doesn't take away the mystery. If anything, it adds to it. We can look at Baptism and say, "I don't understand how this results in that, but Jesus commands this, so we'll do it and trust the Holy Spirit." And the way Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit is kind of mysterious. We're not able to understand exactly how he works. Jesus says, "**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**" (3:8).

This is the mystery of spiritual life. It doesn't mean we don't know anything. We know what God has revealed to us. And he has revealed that the Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life. If someone is alive spiritually, if they are a Christian, it is because the Holy Spirit gave them life.

One of the issues we're inevitably running into at this point is the bondage of the will. *Can an unbeliever simply decide to have faith? Can one choose to become a child of God?* The biblical answer is "no." We don't really like that answer. We like to be in control. We like to take pride in making the right decision. But you can't make yourself believe something you don't believe.

So Christians argue about this. If you look around the internet a bit, you will eventually find Calvinists and Arminians debating the question of free will. Calvinists say we don't have free will. Arminians say we do. We agree with Calvinists, sort of, but they go on to make some unbiblical conclusions based on this. And I'm not sure we really define the bondage of the will in the same way, but I'll let them speak for themselves on that.

When Lutherans talk about the bondage of the will, we mean that we are incapable of turning our hearts to God. Sometimes the question of free will gets stated like this: *Does God allow us the freedom, or choice, to trust in him?* But that's the wrong way to ask the question. Of course God allows us the freedom to trust in him. All throughout the Scriptures, he calls sinners to repentance. He "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). God never blocks a person from repenting. The issue of free will is not a question about God. He wants you to be saved, no question about that. The issue of free will is a question about our ability.

So here's the way Luther teaches the bondage of the will in the Small Catechism: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." That might be the most memorable phrase from the Small Catechism. I've encountered a few adults who memorized the catechism when they were young, and they forgot most of it, except that part. And it's memorable, because it sticks out as kind of weird. "I believe that I cannot ... believe." That's weird, especially when I do believe. But it's true.

For the epistle lesson we read from Ephesians 2, where Paul says that we were dead in our trespasses and sins (2:1). We were "following the prince of the power of the air" (2:2), which is the devil. We were children of wrath (2:3). In short, we hated God. We were his enemies (Rom. 5:10). Not that he wanted to be enemies with us, but we became his enemies when we fell into sin. It's not that God binds us from turning to him, but the bondage is on our part. We are incapable of loving and trusting in God, because our hearts, by nature, hate him. We want to chart our own course. We want to make our own rules. We want to be our own gods. That is our nature, and we are incapable of changing our nature. That is the bondage of the will. It's not that God won't give us the choice, it's that we are incapable of making the right one. I have sometimes thought, *I don't understand why it is that not everyone in the world is a Christian,*

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because the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so overwhelming, and the result is the forgiveness of sins. Everyone should want that. But when we look at it from the perspective of the sinful nature, we should really say, I don't understand why anyone is a Christian.

Answer: the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life. Luther goes on in the catechism, "but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel." Then the word of God is read or spoken, the Holy Spirit attends to that Word. It's how he does his work.

And Paul goes on to say in Ephesians 2, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (2:4-5). He doesn't parse out which member of the Trinity, but we know enough from other passages to see that's the Holy Spirit.

Here's the comfort we have in this doctrine. The bondage of the will might seem like a depressing doctrine sometimes. But here's the comfort: when we are taught to despair of our own ability, we are redirected to trust in the Holy Spirit's ability. Does it depend on our choice? If so, *how do I know if I really meant it? Was I sincere enough?* But if the new birth is really the work of the Holy Spirit, then I have no reason to doubt it. My ability is questionable. His is not.

He is the Lord and Giver of Life. That title comes from the Nicene Creed. It's one of the things I really appreciate about that creed. Within the Holy Trinity, this is the special office of the Holy Spirit: he breathes life into God's creatures.

Some of our hymns do a marvelous job expressing this work. One of my absolute favorites is the Trinity hymn "Praise to the Father, the Glorious King." We might sing it some Wednesday in Lent, even though the tune is much more joyful and triumphant than most Lenten hymns. In the verse on the Holy Spirit, and it's right where we get to the crescendo, so you kind of want to sing-shout it, there's a line that says, "Darkness and death drink from thy quickening breath." We don't use the word "quicken" very much anymore. It means "to make alive." In the old wording of the Apostles' Creed, back in the days of the *Concordia Hymnal*, we used to confess that Jesus will "judge the *quick* and the dead." Now it's "the *living* and the dead." That word "quicken" describes the Holy Spirit's work of making things alive. This world is filled with darkness and death. And it seems so impossible that darkness can turn to light or death can turn to life. But this is the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. So I really appreciate the way that hymn teaches the work of the Holy Spirit. And I have to give credit where credit is due, that hymn was written by an Anglican pastor in the 1800s. I talk about Lutherans having this robust doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace. But if you ever find some traditional, old-school type of Anglicans, their doctrine of the Holy Spirit will be quite similar.

And many of the Pentecost hymns we're singing during this series speak of the Holy Spirit breathing life into us, like our theme hymn, "Come, O Come, Thou Quicken Spirit." It's a prayer to the Holy Spirit. Most often, as Christians, we direct our prayers to the Father, since he is the giver of every good thing. But it is also good and right to pray to the Son or to the Holy Spirit. This hymn leads us in prayer to the Holy Spirit. And by faithfully teaching us to pray, it also teaches us what work we should expect the Holy Spirit to do in our lives. We should expect him to quicken our hearts. We should expect him to lead us in understanding the truth of Scripture. We should expect him to bring us to repentance when we sin. And we should expect him to preserve us in the faith so that we will enter the new creation as God's beloved children.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the Lord and Giver of Life. This is why we treasure his means of grace: the Word of God and the sacraments. There's a mystery about them, that

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they have a greater power than we would expect. It's mysterious how they bring souls to life. That power is the Holy Spirit. He takes the forgiveness that Jesus earned through his blood, and he delivers it to you. He takes the new life that Jesus rose to, and he breathes it into our dark and dead souls. May he always do this work among us until, at last, we come to completion in the new creation. Amen.

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