

March 8, 2012

Lent 2

Text: John 3:1-7

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.'" (ESV)

On Being Born Again

I don't know about you, but I get a little uneasy when I hear someone calling himself a "born again Christian." It sounds like he is claiming to be a "real Christian" and implying that the rest of us aren't.

But the truth is that all believers in Christ are born again. The idea of being "born again" comes from our text when Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."¹ Actually, the words "born again" might be better translated "born from above."² To be born from above means that conversion (or spiritual birth) is something worked by God alone for he is the One who is above us.

In our text for today, we meet an influential Pharisee named Nicodemus. He's so important that he sits on the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin. But unlike the rest of his colleagues, he knew that Jesus had something he needed.

At any rate, Nicodemus came to Jesus late one night. He came at night on the sly, lest he be seen with Christ and lose the respect of his peers. The thing that most impresses him are Christ's signs or miracles. Instinctively, he knows that God has sent him.

But Christ looks into Nicodemus' heart. He was dead in his trespasses and sins. He was devoid of spiritual life. So the Lord said to him, "Unless one is born again (i.e., born from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God."³

Nicodemus was, no doubt, shocked. Jesus says he needs to be born again. He had never heard of such a thing. He, like most of the Jews, thought that his good behavior (or DNA) would get him to heaven. But it won't. Poor Nicodemus -- he is suddenly stripped of all his supposed saintliness. Jesus tells him that he is a spiritually dead sinner in need of a Savior.

But still he doesn't get it. So he says to Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"⁴ Here, we see that Nicodemus thinks being born again is a physical thing. But Jesus will not let that falsehood stand. So he speaks of spiritual birth, saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."⁵

Note, closely, what Jesus says about this new birth. He says “water and [the] Spirit bring about this birth: Not water alone, but “Spirit-water” as one entity. What is this “Spirit-water?” It is the Holy Spirit working in and through ordinary water. This can only refer to one thing: Baptism.

To clarify what he has just said about spiritual birth, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “**That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.**”⁶ What Jesus means is that only the Spirit of God, i.e., only the Holy Spirit can bring about spiritual birth. And he does it through Baptism.

Please note that spiritual birth is entirely God’s work. When a mother gives birth, she does all the work. The baby endures quite a bit as it travels through the birth canal, but the baby does not provide the work. The work comes from the mother. The baby experiences the labor, but nothing else.

Things are the same in the spiritual birth of conversion. Although a great deal is happening to us during this life-changing process, we do absolutely nothing to make it happen. So ...

- We do not decide to follow Jesus.
- We do not make a decision to accept Jesus.
- We do not pray that Jesus would come into our hearts.

Just as the mother does all the work in physical birth, so God does all the work in spiritual birth. We do nothing. We only receive what God has given to us.

Let’s revisit Jesus and Nicodemus. Toward the end of their midnight conversation, Jesus gave him a promise to cling to. Something easier to understand. He said to him, “**For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.**”⁷

Like Nicodemus, we too are in need of spiritual birth. For most of you, this took place when you were an infant. St. Paul tells us of the divine transaction that took place in your baptisms. He writes,

“You were buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.”⁸

What does this mean? When Paul says, “You were buried with [Christ] in baptism,” we should reason as follows: Christ is my Substitute. Therefore, when he died for my sins and was buried, God counts it as though I suffered the same death and burial to pay for my sins.

This connection to Christ’s death and burial took place at my baptism when the Holy Spirit created saving faith in my heart. That is, in baptism, I died for my sins 2000 years ago.

But there is more Good News, for Paul continues, saying, “In [baptism] you were also raised with [Christ].” That is, since Christ rose from the dead, so in baptism, I also rose from spiritual death to spiritual life. Indeed, the Holy Spirit worked in me a living faith such that I became “born again” or “born from above.”

So then, as born-from-above Christians, we are both saints and sinners. According to our fleshly selves, the old, sinful nature constantly wants to drag us into sin. St. Paul says that, according to our sinful nature, we are “slaves to sin.”⁹ But according to our new nature in Christ, we are “slaves to righteousness.”¹⁰ Thus, the Christian life is a paradox.

So far, we have primarily considered our justification (our coming to the faith), but now I want to treat our sanctification (our growing in the faith).

With that in mind, I would like to tell you a story about several brothers. They decided to take the trip of their lifetimes. They were about to raft down the Africa’s mighty Zambezi River. The Zambezi is known for two things: Whitewater and crocodiles. The whitewater is far more turbulent than anywhere in the U.S. The crocodiles are among the largest and most ferocious in the world.

Just before they began, the guide said, “When the raft flips over ...” He didn’t say, “If the raft flips over.” He didn’t say, “There’s a chance the raft will flip over.” No, he said, “When the raft flips over.”

He went on, “When the raft flips over stay in the rough water. You will be tempted to swim toward the stagnant water at the edge of the banks. Don’t do it, because it’s in the stagnant water that the crocs wait for you. They are large and hungry. Even when the raft flips, stay in the rough water.”¹¹

Heading for stagnant waters can kill you on the Zambezi. You can do even worse when it comes to your spiritual lives. Stagnation can lead to spiritual death. For it is in the stagnant waters where Satan waits to sink his teeth into you and drag you away from God’s Word and the Sacrament.

When you start saying to yourself, “Church is boring and I don’t need it anymore,” that’s the sign that Satan is trying to drag you away from Christ. Keep it up long enough and the stagnant waters will lead to spiritual death and damnation. Yes, Satan’s crocodiles shall have you for dinner.

So remain in the whitewater ...

- in the stream of the life-giving waters of baptism,
- in the living Word of God, and
- in the forgiving body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.

Keep trusting in Christ crucified. He drains the cup of death. From his wounds flow his holy, precious blood with which he fills the cup of blessing in the Sacrament of his body and blood. Thus, whenever we kneel at the altar, we partake of the fountain of life: spiritual and eternal life!

Never forget the Gospel. In the spiritual battle between the saint and sinner that we are, we should never despair. Think of the prodigal son.

No matter how far away from God our prodigal heart carries us, our Father never gives up on us.

- He never tires of forgiving us.

- He never stops scanning the horizon, waiting to run toward us with a royal robe and the family signet ring.
- We lay our prodigal heart into his mighty embrace, close our eyes, and find rest in his peace that surpasses all understanding.
- And all the while, He strokes our hair, whispering, “Welcome home, my precious child. Welcome home.”¹²

By the way, Nicodemus became a Christian. He helped Joseph of Arimathea entomb the body of Jesus.¹³ It would seem that the midnight conversation with Jesus ultimately led him to embrace Jesus as his Savior.

So it seems that we will see Nicodemus in heaven. May God grant that we remain in the faith unto life everlasting. **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

¹See John 3:3.

²See the Greek word *anōthen* in William Arndt, Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker (Editor), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) on BibleWorks 9, loc. cit.

³See John 3:3.

⁴See John 3:4.

⁵See John 3:5. There are no definite articles before either “water” or “Spirit.” To translate as “born of water and the Spirit” is grammatically problematic. Since the preposition ἐξ (of) ties water and spirit together, the phrase is best translated as “born of water and Spirit.” Water and Spirit refer to one act not two. Many wrongly teach that “born of water” refers to physical birth when the mother’s water sack is broken. They further teach that “born of [the] Spirit” refers to spiritual birth worked the Holy Spirit. So, they teach that there are two births, first of water (physical) and second of the Holy Spirit (spiritual). This is wrong. The birth referred to, here, is one act of God effected by the Holy Spirit using water. Grammatically, this makes it clear that there is only one act of God by which the Holy Spirit acts through water, namely, water baptism. The whole phrase “born of water and Spirit” refers to spiritual birth through Holy Baptism.

⁶See John 3:6.

⁷See John 3:16.

⁸See Colossians 2:12 and its relevant context in Colossians [2:11-13](#).

⁹See Romans 6:17, NIV.

¹⁰See Romans 6:18.

¹¹Adapted from Palmer Chinchin, PhD, *True Religion* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), pp. 55-57.

¹²See Donna Pyle, *Forgiveness* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), pp. 186-187.

¹³See [John 19:38-40](#).