

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

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Holy Trinity Sunday (2022)

To Be Born Again is to be Born of God

Rev. Toby Byrd

“Jesus answered, “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. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” (John 3:5–7, ESV)

Holy Trinity Sunday, that day on which the Church gives no doubt as to whom they worship and of whose children they are. On this day, the Church proclaims they are the children of God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, of God the Son, Redeemer of all mankind, and of God the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier of mankind. One God in three persons, one undivided essence and three distinct coeternal persons in that essence. This is what we confessed earlier in the Athanasian Creed: “This is the true Christian faith, that we worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God.” This is a mystery understood only by faith, it is a mystery which so many fail to understand, but without this understanding, without this abiding faith in the One true God, one cannot call themselves a child of God, or a member of God’s kingdom.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, certainly believes in God, but he lacks the understanding of the One true God. Yet even without this understanding, he sees something special in Jesus and desiring to speak to Him, he comes to Him at night saying, ***“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.” (John 3:2, ESV)*** It’s obvious to Nicodemus that Jesus has been called by God to work miracles upon God’s people, Israel. But it’s not obvious to him who Jesus is. He calls Him ***“rabbi,”*** and ***“teacher,”*** because he doesn’t understand who the true Messiah is, the Divine Son of God. As far as Nicodemus knows, Jesus is nothing more than a man. Oh, to be sure, He is a special man, but a man none-the-less. It is here that the Gospel Reading makes us aware of our humanity: we are ***“flesh of flesh,”*** while it also tells us that God desires and grants us rebirth through ***“the Spirit”*** making us ***“spirit”*** filled children of His. Indeed, the Gospel Reading for today tells us that no one can come to a proper understanding of who God is without having been born again. Nor can a person be a member of God’s kingdom, a child of God, without having been born again through water and the Spirit: through Holy Baptism.

This man Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night is a religious leader, so we ask, how is it possible that he cannot see the kingdom of God? Yet, our Lord’s line of reasoning bewilders him. It’s obvious he didn’t understand the significance of our Lord’s question, perceiving it to refer to human birth, so, 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?” (John 3:4, ESV)***

O, Nicodemus, you, poor unregenerated soul. You are filled with the desire to live according to the Law of God, relying on your status as a child of Abraham to get you into heaven. Yet you have forgotten that God said, ***“I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6, ESV)*** Then, to give Nicodemus a beginning of understanding God’s desire for man, Jesus says to him, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3, ESV)*** This statement by Jesus not only confused Nicodemus, but it has confused many ever since.

Nicodemus is thinking only in human terms. He is thinking of the natural procreation of children through the intimate relationship of a man and a woman. But Jesus desires to turn Nicodemus' understanding and his heart to God's method of making children for His kingdom. Therefore, He tells him, ***“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.”*** (vv. 5-6)

When Jesus says, ***“That which is born of the flesh is flesh,”*** He is alluding to the corruption of man since his fall in the Garden of Eden. Every human inherits Adam's original sin at birth. This corruption is so evil that it can only be overcome by God. God affirms this, saying, ***“the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth.”*** (Genesis 8:21, ESV) Furthermore, St. Paul speaks of this corruption in his letter to the Ephesians, saying, ***“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”*** (Ephesians 2:1–3, ESV) Again in his letter to Titus, he says, ***“For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”*** (Titus 3:3–7, ESV) St. Paul speaks as one led by the Spirit as he speaks of Baptism and its saving power. He tells us that from birth man is preconditioned to sin against God, his neighbor, and himself. He is preconditioned to rely on his strength for preservation. Even if he becomes aware of God, he still, because of his corrupted flesh, believes that by his own power, his own will, or his own willingness, he can cooperate with God, affecting his salvation, earning his forgiveness. But Scripture teaches that every sin is rebellion against God and merits damnation (Gal. 3:10), and it also teaches that man is unable to merit salvation by his works or will (Eph. 2:8-9).

But God, knowing man's pitiful condition, willed that men could be saved from the eternal destruction toward which they were marching. Therefore, He sent His only begotten Son into this world of sin and death to rescue men from themselves. His Son fulfilled His mission and rescued all men from sin, death, and the devil by His atoning sacrifice upon the Altar of the Cross. The Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, willingly gave His life as a ransom for ours, defeating sin, death, and the devil, pouring out His blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Moreover, to ensure this sacrificial gift of forgiveness was offered and given to His people, God instituted the Means of Grace: the proclamation of the Gospel, Baptism, Holy Communion, and Absolution. So on this day when we listen to our Lord Jesus explain to Nicodemus how Baptism makes him a child of God, a member of God's kingdom, washed and purified by water and the gift of the Holy Spirit, He tells you, you too were born of flesh, but God in His grace and mercy, gave you a new birth through water and the Spirit poured out upon you at the font, in your Baptism.

As Jesus said to Nicodemus, ***“unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God,”*** (John 3:5, ESV) He is speaking of Baptism. Through Baptism you were created to be a new living being, made so by God through His Spirit. The term “baptize” means to wash with water, thus St. Paul likens this washing to the death and resurrection of Christ, saying, ***“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in***

*newness of life.” (Romans 6:3–4, ESV) In those blessed waters the Old Adam in you was crucified with Christ that you may no longer be a slave to sin. Your old self was drowned, sin in you died, you were rescued from death and the devil, and you were given eternal salvation. Regarding Baptism, St. Peter, on that first Christian Pentecost, said that Baptism grants, “**the forgiveness of your sins . . . the gift of the Holy Spirit,**” and it is God’s, “**promise . . . for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.**” (Acts 2:38–39, ESV) Furthermore, in his first epistle, he said, “**Baptism . . . now saves you.**” (1 Peter 3:21, ESV) All this is offered to you through rebirth by the Spirit of God.*

It is this same washing, this same rebirth that Jesus speaks of at His Ascension, commanding His apostles to bring this rebirth to all nations, saying, “**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,**” (Matthew 28:19, ESV) Go and add holy children to the kingdom of God by baptizing the children of men in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What a marvelous gift God has given the children of man, transforming them, literally granting them new birth. No longer is man enslaved to wander the earth as corrupted children, lost, and condemned, without hope of salvation. But God’s desire is to save man from this awful plight; therefore, He graciously brings men to the Baptismal font and through water and the Spirit, He transforms them from the walking dead to living children of His. Children filled with the Holy Spirit that they may walk in God’s light as His forgiven children for all eternity giving honor and praise to the Triune God, the One in whose name they are reborn: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, St. Paul declares, “**Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!**” (Romans 11:33, ESV)

Yet even after hearing the words of Christ, Nicodemus asks, “**How can these things be?**” (John 3:9, ESV) His thoughts are still focused on human birth, and he fails to understand the rebirth of which Jesus speaks. Jesus asks him are you not a teacher, a pastor, a theologian in God’s church, yet you do not understand? Indeed, how can you not understand?

In fact Jesus is telling Nicodemus, by yourself, by your wisdom and your insight, you cannot understand these things. To many the Word of God is like the wind, you hear it, but you do not know from where it comes or to where it goes. God opens many venues through which His Word is proclaimed, as in Baptism. In Baptism His Word is the principal force. You hear the Word and feel the water, but without the Word there is no Baptism. So, too, in Holy Communion, bread and wine are of no effect without the Word. Without the Word in Baptism, water remains water, and without the Word in Holy Communion, bread and wine remain bread and wine. But when the Word accompanies these signs, the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper become efficacious, the blessings attached to these Means of Grace is poured out upon the recipient. God’s grace and mercy becomes a physical reality. As a rushing wind, God’s Word brings the Holy Spirit and through the infused Spirit, given in the waters of Baptism, you are given the gift of faith to believe in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, you are *Reborn of God*.

This is the rebirth spoken of by Jesus, where you are “**born of water and the Spirit,**” and brought into “**the kingdom of God,**” so that you may confidently say you are a child of the Triune God, the Father, ✠ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Corinthians 13:14, ESV) Amen.