

## **Advent III-2014**

### **Restoration through Water and the Spirit**

**Grace, Mercy and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**

**Amen**

Today/tonight we will take one final look, during these mid-week services in this Season of Light, at the Coming of the Light of Life; one last glimpse at His Divine Work of Creation, Re-creation and Restoration. However, I pray that by no means will this be the last time you'll hear in this place of the Light of God still shining in his workmanship.

Two weeks ago you heard the message of Jesus' shining light of salvation. Then last week many of you heard the message of what Jesus' saving work accomplished. And it was promised to you that today you would hear that just as Jesus re-created us, He made us alive again and one with God through Holy Baptism. To that end, we will again be looking at the Gospel of St. John.

This Gospel text begins with an answer by Jesus to a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, an important one, likely a member of the Sanhedrin. He was learned, faithful, respected, a leader, a ruler. He knew of Jesus' turning water into wine and His doing other signs.

He speaks on behalf of others, seemingly curious if not impressed with Jesus and even addresses him as Rabbi. Nicodemus seems to get it, to be on Jesus' side. He's a fan. He knows what Jesus is all about. He approaches Jesus, having marveled at his signs, convinced God was "with" Him.

The account itself is familiar enough to us, albeit somewhat clunky and challenging to understand at face value. It appears to be a general summary of a conversation, somewhat abrupt in transitions and without contemporary

flow. Or maybe we hear Jesus giving the right answer to a wrong question. We begin:

*Jesus answered him saying, “Truly, truly I continue to say to you Nicodemus, if **not** someone may have been born from above **not** he continues to have power to have beheld the kingdom of the God.”<sup>1</sup>*

Being well-versed in Old Testament scripture, Nicodemus was no doubt familiar with the concept of the “Kingdom of God.” But Jesus’ statement contradicts many assumptions that the Pharisees held and likely caught Nicodemus off guard. When it came to Salvation, most Jews of that time were certain that they were “in” because of their own righteousness or bloodline. Jesus’ words didn’t just view the Kingdom of God from a different angle. They didn’t just challenge Nicodemus to take a fresh look at a familiar concept. Jesus was telling him God’s Kingdom was unavailable to those who had not been born from above. What we have proclaimed here is a paradigm shift of epic proportions.

Jesus insists that without being born again, no one can comprehend the works and ways of God. This notion of being born from above is a direct reference to salvation; Jesus’ revelation of salvation is a new construct for the Pharisees; altogether different from what Nicodemus would have learned, believed and taught. Our text continues:

*Nicodemus continues to say to him, “How does man have power to be born, continually being old? Not he continues to have power to go into the womb of his mother a second time and to be born.”<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> John 3:3

<sup>2</sup> John 3:4

The response that Nicodemus gives is a little goofy. Maybe, for whatever reason, Nicodemus took Jesus literally and asks for clarity in a strictly biological framework. Or, maybe, Nicodemus is speaking figuratively in return and wasn't so literal after all; in which case, the reply is a little more thoughtful but still lacking understanding. Certainly, Nicodemus didn't understand Jesus' insistence on the necessity of new birth. The Pharisee is very much like you and me when we are faced directly with God revealing His mysteries.

Jesus is changing everything: He is saying that even a man of Nicodemus' religious, national and faith pedigree falls short of earning entrance into the Kingdom of God. It is not a matter of turning over a new leaf of fine tuning or self improvement. The very nature of man, Nicodemus' nature as well as ours, wants to resolve the problem by human work and words—for us to find our own way into the Kingdom of God. However, only God can affect this rebirth; indeed, how can someone be born on their own?!

This is probably a good place for us to pause. There is a profound supposition here: That is, that we **need** to be born, to enter life, because we are dead and living in a word of death. All this talk of Entering the Kingdom of God, of Salvation ... Let us not overlook the fact that we need saving, need life.

There is a problem here. While our first father and mother were created "very good," that is no longer the case. Because of the results of the sin which they brought into the Creation, we are conceived dead and in need of spiritual birth: our "natural" birth is fleshly, fallen and sinful. Indeed, we have no power in ourselves to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is Jesus' work on the cross that accomplished all that is needed for us.

That appears to be why Jesus repeats the statement in different terms:

*Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly I continue to say to you Nicodemus, if not someone may have been born from water and spirit not he continues to have power to go in into the kingdom of the God."<sup>3</sup>*

This answer is very similar to the first one. Jesus is not changing the conditions. Here He says, "*being born of water and Spirit*" rather than, "*being born anew.*" Likewise here He talks of **entering** the Kingdom of God rather than **seeing** the Kingdom of God. Jesus isn't disagreeing with Himself—he is explaining, all the while prophesying.

He was following the pattern of God's true prophets. He is following the model that the Spirit inspired in Isaiah and Ezekiel. For example, this verse in John also further explains how the Lord prophesied through Ezekiel (36:25-27). There He taught that He would grant to the baptized a new heart and His Holy Spirit. Ezekiel's words which were foretelling a promised, cleansing water and a new spirit would have been familiar to Nicodemus' ears (in the First Century AD lectionary perhaps). Maybe Nicodemus should have not been so surprised at Jesus' words after all.

At any rate, Jesus' focus on the new birth is on the intervention of the Spirit of God, which is a relief, right? Our re-birth from above is spiritual, powerful and joyous. It is a gift of God. We don't have to earn it, come to Jesus and accept Him into our hearts, or otherwise take ownership in any way that would mess the whole thing up. Apparently it has something to do with being born of water ...

The adoption, our adoption as children into God's family, into His Kingdom, is accomplished not of our own doing any more than our first birth or man's first creation was of his by his own hand. Our Confessions state that we are

---

<sup>3</sup> John 3:5

born by the Word and Sacrament, that we are to take up Baptism by which we are first received into the Christian Church. Is it any wonder then, that we continue to pray for our churches, that they, that we would remain faithful to Word and Sacrament ministry?

Jesus continues to teach Nicodemus and us:

*“The one having been born from the flesh, remains flesh; and the one having been born from the Spirit, remains spirit.”<sup>4</sup>*

Our natural, physical birth comes from human nature, our fallen human nature to be precise. This spiritual rebirth comes from the Holy Spirit alone through God’s appointed Means of Grace. Only by spiritual rebirth can you, and anyone, enter into the spiritual order or family that is God’s Kingdom. Our rebirth is in some ways converse to Christ’s coming that we contemplate during this Season of Waiting. For Christ’s birth into flesh from spiritual realms is the inverse of our birth into Spirit from the flesh. Jesus says, to Nicodemus and to you:

*You must not continue to wonder that I have said to you, “It remains necessary for you all to be born from above.”<sup>5</sup>*

Here, as we look at the text in the original language, we may see a plural “You.” His truth, His “truly, truly” applies to the needs of all to be born from above. Through the Spirit and through the Water, He has caused us to be born again. We are born again to the Father’s covenantal promise through his Word and visible means of grace—this is a certainty, as certain as any promise of God. Jesus speaks on...

---

<sup>4</sup> John 3:6

<sup>5</sup> John 3:7

*The wind continues its blowing where it wills, and the voice of him you continue to hear, but **not** you yourself know where it continues to come and where it continues to go. Thus (it) remains for everyone having been born of the Spirit.<sup>6</sup>*

No human is master of the wind—it is an act of God, yet another part of His creative work. Likewise, this new birth of the Spirit is independent of human will. The hidden work of the Spirit in the human heart cannot be seen much less controlled, but its effects are evident; in the good works that God does through us, in the love we share in His Church, in our joy even during a penitential season.

We rejoice that God bestows on us through the Word and Waters of Baptism His Holy Spirit to bring us into His Kingdom where, as we sing in the Hymn, “we shall reap celestial joy.” But as is often the case, He is not speaking only of the spiritual heaven, for Scripture says that He makes all things new, spiritual and physical. The blessings of God’s new creation begin **now** for the believers.

If you didn’t hear it earlier ... There is your Joy, your “Rose,” your Gaudete. This re-creation has been accomplished! And His Kingdom Has Come.

Peter says “We rejoice with joy that is inexpressible.” And why not? The Light of the World has come to us to re-create in us this re-birth. But it is not only our joy, the joy is also His; as we hear in Isaiah, “I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people.” How beautiful that the Creator finds joy in what he re-creates!

And now, for the rest of the story: The last we hear of Nicodemus in Scripture, he is alongside Joseph of Arimathea, caring for the body of Christ after his death on the cross. (He beheld the cross which accomplished

---

<sup>6</sup> John 3:8

entrance into the Kingdom of God for this Nicodemus, and the body of the Word made Flesh which Nicodemus beheld with his own eyes.)

According to tradition, he became a professed disciple of Christ and was baptized by Peter and John. Rejoicing, we have reason to believe that the Spirit of God came to him and he too was born from above.

And so in response to this Good News, as His children born from above, we simply offer our sacrifices of Prayer, Praise and Thanksgiving:

- We Pray that the Holy Spirit would continue to keep us steadfast in the One True Faith.
- We Praise the Father for His sanctifying work of rebirth in Holy Baptism.
- And we offer our Thanks for the Word Made Flesh, who is the Light of the World.

**And now may the Peace that passes all understanding, which comes from being born from above in the Water and Spirit, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.**

December 17, 2014

Psalms 14, 16 and 85; Isaiah 65:17-19; I Peter 1:3-9; John 3:3-8

*Deacon Tom Houbrink*