

Calling into existence Faith in the Son

John 3:1-17

Second Sunday in Lent

March 8, 2020

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

Our text, the gospel reading – well known for its 16<sup>th</sup> verse, but we highlight it *in context*: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Unlike much of the church year’s assigned lectionary, the Sundays in this Lenten do not follow a *chronological* pattern through the gospels as much as a *thematic* one. And, with these themes, the faithful are comforted during your 40 days of Lenten exercise as you anticipate Holy Week and our Lord’s passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. The season can truly can be a weighty meditation, and so – in the face of our sin – we need an equally weighty consolation!

This morning’s *theme*, if you will, comforts us with the reminder that, by God’s grace, we have been brought into the family of faith. The Old Covenant ‘type’ or foreshadowing of this comforting mystery is God’s established covenant with Abraham – who, being sent as a sojourner – would be promised an inherited land for his children. In the epistle reading, St Paul reminds us that though

Abraham may have been a forefather according to the flesh, it was the offspring of his faith that would benefit... because faith, not flesh, is that which holds to the promises of God. Paul says, “That is why it depends on faith (not as if faith is a meritorious factor, but simply as a factor within the whole economy of salvation), in order that the *promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring.*”

Notice what St Paul says here: faith is not the foundation of all this... the *promise* is, the *guarantee* is. And faith clings to *that*, not to itself, but to the promise and guarantee... and that promise and guarantee benefits all who share in the faith of that covenant promise that God “gives life to the dead.” If we were saved by some *merit of faith* that wells up from within, then God wouldn’t be giving life to the dead, he’d be giving life to the already-living... he’d only be rewarding those who already made themselves alive! No need for Christ, no need for the Holy Spirit – just me and my faith in the Father! But faith doesn’t well-up from within to our own merit and deserved reward, rather God “gives life to the dead and *calls into existence the things that do not exist* (including faith)... in other words, calls *us* into existence... grants us faith by calling us into existence as children of the covenant... just as he once called into existence “Abraham” from a man, Abram, who had no merit of his own, but was given a new life according to the promised covenant.

Now, that brings us to the gospel reading and the greater reality, the fulfillment, of that covenant with Abraham. Nicodemus, a man of the *Pharisees* – that group of self-righteous learned leaders of the Jews that was always claiming to be children of Abraham (but in their minds, the connection, the lineage, was a physical one, by birth, by law, by right) – Nicodemus comes to Jesus.

And, in that pharisaical self-righteousness, Nicodemus claims the Pharisees have an innate ability to determine what belongs to God's kingdom and what doesn't. At first glance, that may not sound so strange: Christians think they can do the same thing: "Well, as a Christian, I can tell what's Christian and what's not. I can determine/decide what belongs to God's kingdom and what doesn't." Not true. You have no say over it. Only the Word of God does. Only His revealed truth does. If your definition of what is "Christian, part of the family of God, according to his institution and design of His family"... if your definition and view of that disagrees with God's Word, then such view is useless, misleading, and needs to be repented of. And yet, how many there are who think the Church gets to determine the truth of God's Word rather than confessing that God's Word determines the truth of the Church!

And so, Jesus corrects Nicodemus to help him consider that the one who wants to live by human wisdom and a *fleshly* lineage has misunderstood God's kingdom, which is given life only by the work of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of that life, who has called

us into and created us anew in this spiritual family (meaning *not* “a family of religious, pious thinking,” but meaning “family that is given life by the Holy Spirit”). And so, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Now, there’s one word in there that Nicodemus misunderstood and, based on his misunderstanding, much of the Christian church (especially the English-speaking Christian Church, including our own English version of the reading) misunderstands alongside him. Nicodemus 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?” In other words, “How can a man be born again?” And, because so many have followed Nicodemus’ erroneous question **assuming it was the right question to ask**, they have misunderstood that the question is already headed off on the wrong track and they are destined to misinterpret the answer! And, sure enough, the word Nicodemus interprets to mean “again” *far more likely* was used by Christ to mean “from above” (same word, two meanings). Of all other uses of this word ἀνωθεν in the New Testament, only *once* is it used to mean “again.” In all other cases it means “from above.” Is it true that we can speak of being brought into the faith as “being born again”? Sure. But we understand the comfort of God “giving life to the dead and calling into existence the things that do not exist” when we understand that one is *born from above*... not according to a fleshly lineage, but a spiritual one (again, not spiritual in the sense

that I have shown myself to be very religious, but spiritual meaning “from/by the Spirit”). In the very beginning of this gospel of John, it is explained that, based on Christ’s name, God gave us the right to become children of God (sound like the covenantal family?)... children of God, born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh... but *born of God*” ... yes, born *from above*. And so, Jesus should have been heard to say, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Immediately, with such description, we must admit how impossible this is for us to achieve, choose, or claim for ourselves. This makes no sense to the “natural” man, who is born according to the lineage of flesh and blood, so how can he naturally “choose” it? He can only “choose” it if he has already been given faith; and if he has already been given faith, then he is already part of the family which God has called into existence, creating a family out of nothing, and bringing life to those formerly dead in their sins... causing them to be “born from above.”

Now, this should show us just how off the mark is Nicodemus’ question; why would we follow his line of thought? Instead, Jesus expounds on this “being born from above”:

“Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (Why not?) For that which is born of the flesh (yes, that fleshly lineage) is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit (yes, that spiritual lineage of the covenant) is spirit.”

Some (focusing on “born *again*”) would like to claim here that Jesus is saying that to be born of water and the Spirit are two different births – the being born of water is the first birth, according to the flesh, and the being born of the Spirit (*apart* from water) is the second birth. But, this is not in keeping with the rest of the Scriptures – in which the Old Testament types of salvation and deliverance as the people of God happens through water – the flood, the Red Sea, the Jordan River upon entrance into the promised land, the cleansing of leprous Naaman. Nor is it in keeping with the New Covenant’s greater fulfillment, such as when Paul calls baptism the washing of regeneration by the Holy Spirit “whom He poured out on us”... And Peter says of the reality greater than the flood of Noah, “Baptism now saves us,” so that Peter asks on behalf of the Gentiles, “How can they be prevented baptism?” and the Ethiopian asks on his own accord when (being taught by Philip) he sees water, “What prevents me from being baptized?”

And those faithful, joyous questions are asked because baptism is entrance into the spiritual family... not because you’ve made a choice of obedience to be baptized – such would be giving life to the already alive... but because baptism is entrance into the life of the new covenant. Baptism is the being born from above that sheds the identity based on the old fleshly lineage and gives you a new identity (the blood of Christ is thicker than the blood of family!)

that is worked upon you by the Holy Spirit, that giver of Life, who is gifted to you in Baptism as you are adopted into the baptismal life ahead. “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive *the gift of the Holy Spirit*... and this is for you, your children and all who are far off (all those still part of that dead fleshly lineage) all who the Lord our God will call unto himself” (or, to paraphrase what Paul says in our epistle reading), ‘All who benefit from the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence (calls unto himself) the things that formerly did not exist... the children of faith who formerly did not exist... who formerly were children of darkness, “Abrams” of the line of flesh, but now are renamed according to the spiritual lineage of promise.’

Now, if being born of the Spirit was something that happened *outside of baptismal waters*, by one’s own efforts to commit himself to the will of God, would Nicodemus have had any trouble with it? Wouldn’t he have said, “Oh yes, I’m a good faithful Pharisee. I already have committed myself to my faith?” Isn’t that how so many people are taught, even how we sometimes think of this entrance into the spiritual family of God? – “Oh yes, I’m a good Christian. I already have committed myself to this, so God should be pleased.”

But Nicodemus’ response shows he at least recognizes this is a matter that happens far apart and beyond human comprehension.

“How can these things be?” Yes, Jesus, you can say all you want, “Do not marvel,” but we don’t understand how this works! You attach some water to the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit is given, and life is created out of death, and the covenantal family of God is born out of nothingness? How can this be?

Just a moment ago, I quoted Peter’s words on the day of Pentecost, “Repent and be baptized *in the name of Jesus Christ.*” That doesn’t mean, “I’m attaching myself to Jesus Christ;” it means “be baptized by the power and authority of Jesus who can do such wondrous things.” Don’t take my word for that, or even Peter’s, but Jesus himself says in our text, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” Yes, we can only take him at his word, because he alone knows the mysteries of heaven. He alone knows the Father’s will to create life from the dead, to call into existence the things that do not exist, to make a spiritual lineage by calling the Church out of the world’s fleshly lineage (isn’t that what the exact Greek term for “church” – *ἐκκλησία* – means? “To be called out”).

Yes, the Church hangs its hat on, owes its existence to, has become something out of nothing, solely because of Jesus Christ. And now, we come to those famous words that comfort us, cheer us, and assure us as the spiritual family of God who have been born from above by being baptized into this Jesus’ death. Those famous words that speak of God’s love for us through a very specific means

of life-giving sacrifice which has given life to this new covenant and, with it, the spiritual lineage that travels as sojourners unto a land promised to us and for us. Those famous words:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up (has to happen; God's plan of salvation), that whoever believes *in Him* (in this Christ, crucified on the cross) may have eternal life. For God (in this way) loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

There is the comfort of God's covenant with you – it's been certified and sealed by the death of Christ. It is certain because the Son of Man has been lifted up, and thereby God has not only shown an image of his love, but has poured out his love to you... that in this season of repentant exercise, indeed in a life of repentant exercise, you may have certain comfort, may live in certain comfort – never to be taken from you (the blood of Christ is thicker than the blood of family!) – that you are children of Abraham's faith in the coming Messiah, or – more properly – children of God born from above through holy waters – not "I was baptized, but I *am* baptized" (you never outgrow that! – not at your confirmation, your wedding, your "first job", never!) – having been **called out** of the orphanage of death and adopted into the Triune name – **called into** existence and given new birth in the Spirit, living in the spiritual family of faith, with a promised land inheritance of eternal life.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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