

John 3:1-17
Second Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2023

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

Our text, Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus, culminating in these most well-known words:

“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,

Because these words are so well loved, we are tempted to handle them (if you will) sentimentally... meaning, we are tempted to talk about how *much* God loves us and how loved it makes us feel. While that's not wrong, we ought recognize that the Introit, Old Testament Reading, and Epistle Reading all ask us to (and help us to) read the Gospel reading (if you will) not *sentimentally*, but *covenantally*...

The introit begins “He remembers his covenant forever, the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations.”

The Old Testament reading likewise focuses on “covenant language,” as Genesis records God’s covenant with Abram: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

And the Epistle reading also highlights this covenantal relationship, as the apostle writes, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”

Thus, the covenantal language all around us redirects us from considering how *much* God loves us to instead considering *how* God loves us. (That’s the detail of a covenant, isn’t it? What’s the agreement? How does it unfold?)

How God loves us is much more important than “how much” God loves us, because – if God loves us at all – He loves us completely, for God is love. The sinner need not spend time trying to quantify how *much* God loves the sinner, only *that* He does. And as it is most certainly true that He does, then the only question we need to consider is *how* God loves the sinner. In what *way* does God love the sinner? What has God promised, what covenant has He made, by which He shows us how He loves us?

Isn't this really the big picture, not only of Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus, but of the entire Scriptures? God had made a covenant – not only with Abraham – but from the first moments of Adam's Fall. He had made a promise that the Christ would come and destroy sin, death and the devil; and he made a covenant with Abraham that – as the Christ would come through his line – then those of Abraham's line would be beneficiaries of God's covenant. But, Paul explains for us that Abraham's line was not ultimately one of physical genealogy, but it was the line of the faithful. Abraham's myriad of children are not those who share his DNA, but who share hope in the Christ, the 'Christian faith.'

And that hope in Christ, which marks the line of Abraham, is not an act of merit or personal righteousness, but rather the Christian's faith is a meritless hope that throws itself at the feet of the righteous and meritorious Christ. Thus, it is called a righteousness of faith, not because faith is itself righteous, but because it's Lord is. As Paul says it, "This is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace." Notice that: salvation rests on faith only because faith rests in the truth of God's grace because of the merit of Christ Jesus. So, to say you are saved by faith is not the full wording of the

covenant. That's not the complete truth of *how* God's covenant works. Rather, you are saved by God grace because of Christ Jesus, to whom faith clings.

All of this is summarized nicely for us in the conversation with Nicodemus, who unveils his motive in appealing to Jesus this way, "Rabbi, we see that you are a teacher come from God." In other words, "I come to you that you may teach me *how* God thinks, how God works, how God loves the sinner."

Jesus' response seems to mildly rebuke Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." In other words, "Nicodemus, you think you have seen and interpreted me rightly. You *think* you have interpreted God and his kingdom rightly. But you have not."

Then, Jesus *does* proceed to teach Nicodemus the *how* of God's kingdom, of God's covenant, of God's love. And, looking not through the lens of all of history, but looking through the lens of the individual sinner, it all starts with being born into the covenant – being born again, born from above. And notice Nicodemus' bewilderment can all be summarized

with that one word: “How?” Yes, how does this covenant work? Jesus states,

“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 flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

To be born of flesh – of the line of Adam – enters one into the covenant of death; that’s the final will and testament Adam has left you. But, to be born of the Spirit is to be born into the covenant of the kingdom of God; that’s the final will and testament Jesus Christ has left you.

Thus, in the birth of water and the Spirit (or, as St Paul calls it in Ephesians 5, “born of water and the word”... or, as the same apostle says it to Titus, “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit poured out on us”... or as St Peter proclaims on the day of Pentecost, “repent and be baptized... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit... a promise for you, your children, and all who are far off, whom the Lord our God will call to himself”)... yes, in *that* covenantal birth that the Lord adopts the sinner into, that one is born anew, born from above, now a child and heir of the covenant of salvation and the things of the Spirit.

Faith and hope can cling to this promise. We need not marvel at this notion of being born again. For spiritual things work much like the wind, which blows as it wishes and we do not understand... we hear it coming and going, we know its presence, but we have no control over it. So, with the things of God: by His own Word joined with the water, we know His Spirit is at work. And because of that Word, we know the Spirit's coming and going, His presence where Word and Sacrament is rightly served, and thus we know faith is created and sustained... but we have no control over it. The Spirit works faith in the heart as is willed by the Father and the Christ who sent Him... and the Holy God wills to give us the Holy Spirit through those sacramental gifts you can locate, that your attempt at finding God need not be as vain as trying to trap wind in a bottle.

So now, we have learned from Christ the first two great covenantal truths that answer Nicodemus' question "How"? First, You are born into the covenant in Holy Baptism. Second, that Holy Baptism gives you the Holy Spirit who – through Word and Sacrament – continues to work faith in the heart.

But, Nicodemus – “Man of Reason” – is not done wrestling with these things. And, again, notice his question: “*How* can these things be?”

You, perhaps, have often wrestled with the same question. We want to understand these things and be in control of them; we want to capture them in a bottle and study them; *then*, if our Reason could make sense of them, *then* we would believe.

But Jesus’ answer reminds us that the matters of God’s covenant with Man through the Christ are *heavenly* matters; they’re not earthly matters. Notice how his rhetorical question paints the picture so simply, so clearly: ““If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Yes, the new covenant between God and Man is a matter of the spiritual places. Our relationship with God is not like a relationship with a school subject, in which we learn it for a time, master it, and move on. Nor is it like a relationship with an organization, in which we carefully weigh whether we’re getting our money’s worth, whether the benefit is worth the cost, and – if not – we’re right to walk away.

No, the relationship with God has been designed by a heavenly covenant; it is truly divine, spiritual, eternal in its content. How can we expect to read it like a contract with fine print?

The only way we can know it properly is through the One who has both descended from heaven and ascended again into it – the Jacob’s Ladder of the New Covenant. He alone has access to the Father; He alone knows and comprehends and even has been given authority over the spiritual and eternal matters of the heavenly places. Thus, what is the ‘third part’ – if you will – of the covenant? If the first was baptism, if the second was a gifted faith through that Baptism, then the third is the object and content of that faith, which is none other than the one who descended from heaven and knows the inner thoughts of God.

And to hope in this Christ is to hope in His merits and the completion of the mission for which He was sent. To hope in this Christ is to recognize that I am not a child of the covenant because of merit and worth, but am actually a child of death, snake-bit by death, dying from the venom of sin, but that – in the spiritual wonders of the heavenly wisdom – God has given this One upon the cross for me, that I may look to *His*

worth, *His* ability to please the Father, and that One will save me and name me a child of God.

For this is the hidden wisdom of the heavenly places – the wisdom that no human reason can ever make sense of: that God in this way loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in that Son should not perish but have eternal life.

Oh, how rationalistic minds *hate* this verse! The questions of “*how* this works” abound:

- “How does looking at a man on a cross save anyone?”
- “How can this be for the whole world, yet not all are saved?”
- “How is this one who suffers both true Man and true God?”
- “How can he be righteous and at the same time the sinner-bearer of all?”
- “How is this loving, for a father to kill his son?”
- “How is this anything but a fairytale?”
- “How is this relevant to my daily life?”
- “How does this help me, for I still end up in the grave?”

Yes, the rationalists can protest forever. But the wisdom of heaven shines forth in the covenant God has made with Man in the man Christ Jesus, to be received by faith. St Paul says it this

way, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as the propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

There is the divine wisdom of God’s covenant. A wisdom that, as we’ve recently heard, is a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others, but a wisdom – namely, salvation through the atoning sacrifice of the Christ – a wisdom that is the very content of the covenant and new testament sealed by the blood of Jesus, and therefore it is the power of God unto salvation. To point to and preach Christ crucified, that all generations may be adopted into the covenant as baptized children who are gifted the faith to rejoice and hope in this covenant. For all who believe in Christ Jesus will have eternal life.

This, Nicodemus, is the *how* of the kingdom of God. God did not desire to alienate the fallen world from His kingdom, but to rebirth the world into His kingdom. And thus, he sent His Son not to condemn the world, but to save the world through that Son. So, we are baptized into his name, we are gifted faith by the work of the Spirit, and we are made and sustained as children of His covenant, that we might one day receive the

fullness of its inheritance and see not only by faith, but by sight,
the kingdom of God.

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

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