

2nd Sunday in Lent

March 20, 2011

John 3:1-17 “Are You Born Again?”

We can trust God’s Word in how it came down to us and in what it says. Last week’s Gospel reading told how Jesus was tempted by the devil three times. Jesus resisted these temptations by quoting God’s Word. God’s Word can also help us to resist temptation, too, and it can answer our questions about God and ourselves. Nicodemus secretly came to Jesus at night with questions he had. Jesus responded by telling Nicodemus he must be born again. Nicodemus wanted to be born again, but he did not know how to do it. Do you know how? Are you born again?

You’ve heard the question before, and sometimes maybe you have been asked, “Are you born again?” Lutherans don’t always know how to answer the question. Nicodemus also didn’t know what the phrase “born again” meant. He asked Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus obviously did not understand what Jesus was talking about. All he could come up with was the thought of a woman rebirthing a child. Most women I know wouldn’t want to rebirth their children! So what did Jesus mean, and what do some Christians mean when they use the phrase? We must go back to the beginning.

We all come into the world as sinners from birth, even from the time of conception in the womb. We inherit the original sin of Adam and Eve, and we inherit a sinful nature. This sinful nature does not allow people to come into the holy presence of God, nor can we rightly worship God. God demands holiness from us, but the sinful nature prevents us from living out the 10 Commandments perfectly in our lives as God requires. Instead of helping us to be perfect before God, all the law can do is show us that we are sinners before God. Paul writes in the epistle reading today that “the law brings wrath.” The reality is that we cannot enter into the holy presence of God. Sin separates us from God.

Therefore, Jesus says that we must be born again to see the kingdom of God. Our physical birth from our mothers brought us into the world with our sinful nature in flesh and blood. Therefore, our sinful, physical bodies need a second, spiritual birth in order to stand before God without sin. We must be born again to see the kingdom of God. So I am putting the question before you again, “Are you born again?”

Jesus explains to Nicodemus what being born again means. He says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” So being born of again requires a spiritual washing with the Holy Spirit and water. Now this is where Christians sometimes differ. Some Christians say that there are two different baptisms – a baptism of water is one, and a baptism of the Holy Spirit is another. They are two different baptisms, and you must undergo both. Other Christians say that the baptism with water and the baptism with the Holy Spirit are one and the same; they are not two different baptisms. What does God’s Word say?

Acts 2:38 makes it very clear that at Pentecost when the people were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins they received the Holy Spirit in that instant. There was no supplemental laying of hands on the people so that they received the Holy Spirit at a later occasion. At Pentecost it was one and the same baptism. Verse 39 adds that this promise is for you and your children, indicating that baptism, forgiveness of sins, and the Holy Spirit are all tied together as one without distinction of age. Therefore, when Jesus speaks about being born again, he is telling Nicodemus that there is a way to become holy before God without sin, and it is the water of baptism that makes this possible by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. You are indeed born again!

The power behind baptism is always the person and work of Jesus Christ. Israel had many teachers, such as Nicodemus, but they were very focused on the rules and laws of the Old Testament. These were earthly and concrete guidelines to follow. They were all that they knew. On a number of occasions, some of the Pharisees contrasted their faithfulness and obedience to Moses and the law with Jesus Christ and his seeming disregard of Moses and the law. They saw Jesus as opposed to Moses, and so they were reluctant to follow what Jesus said. Jesus seemed to be introducing something that they thought was opposed to the Old Testament regulations.

Jesus was indeed bringing something new. Jesus came from heaven to bring rebirth and life, something that obedience to the law was unable to accomplish. Even the Pharisees, with all their efforts to follow Moses and the Old Testament regulations in the Bible, were unable to be perfect before God. No one could measure up to God, and so that is why Jesus came. Jesus, God's Son, came down from heaven to bring us heavenly things – new birth and life through the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus came, of course, to be lifted up on the cross for the world's sins. Jesus' death on the cross was foreshadowed by the time in the wilderness when Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole to bring healing to the people. After God had rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, God became very angry at the people of Israel who were rebelling against him, so he sent snakes into their camp. When the snakes bit them, the people became ill and some people died. But God provided a means of healing for them. He had Moses make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Everyone who looked up at the bronze snake after they were bitten by snakes was healed.

The bronze snake foreshadowed Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus was lifted up on the cross with our sins to take the punishment we deserve for our sins. The cross of Jesus Christ brings spiritual healing to people. When Jesus' sacrifice was completed, he was buried. Three days later he was raised again to life. Jesus' death and resurrection was all according to God's plan from before creation, and he entirely fulfilled the Old Testament and its promise of a Messiah and Savior.

Abraham is given to us as an example of one with saving faith in the Old Testament. He trusted God's promises to him of a son, that he and his people would receive the land, and that he would be the father of a great nation. He did not see all these things come about with his eyes because they were not fulfilled in his lifetime, except the birth of Isaac, but he saw the fulfillment of these things with the eyes of faith. He trusted that God would keep his promises to him. Because of Abraham's faith, God declared him righteous, holy, and his dear child.

Faith believes Jesus' death and resurrection gives life to all who trust in Jesus today – not with eyes that can see the reality of these things fulfilled in us, but with the eyes of faith. Jesus Christ was lifted up on the cross so that whoever believes in him may have forgiveness and eternal life. Without Jesus being lifted up on the cross, there would be no forgiveness, no righteousness, and no life. Without faith placed in what Jesus did for us at the cross, there is no life. Therefore, it is very important that we believe and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Little children and infants also need the benefit of Christ's death and resurrection, otherwise they remain in the original sin they inherit from Adam and Eve from conception. The Holy Spirit works through God's Word which is connected with the water of baptism to bring forgiveness of sins and the creation of faith. Faith is a gift. It is not to be confused with the confession of faith that we make in Jesus when we are able to speak. Faith is a gift that God gives that receives forgiveness, life and salvation in Jesus Christ. In this way, faith remains a gift from God, and not a work of the law which cannot save us.

Everyone in the world who has saving faith in Jesus Christ receives the benefit of his death on the cross. Jesus says in John 3:16-17:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Jesus came into the world to give life and salvation. Before Jesus came, the world was already condemned due to sin. Jesus came to reverse our condemnation. Jesus came so that we can be born again when we receive the benefits of his life, death and resurrection. In this way we are born of the Holy Spirit, which is not our work but the work of God. Everyone in the world who is washed in the water of baptism and receives the Holy Spirit is born again. God loves all people in the world – adults, children, infants – everyone – and God's Spirit gives his good gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation as a gift, by faith planted in our hearts, so that it remains by grace, a gift from God. The same Word of God feeds our infant faith so that it grows strong and bold until one day we make our own public confession of faith in Jesus Christ, such as many of our youth do at their confirmation.

So are Lutherans born again? Are you born again? You certainly are. We are born again by water and the Holy Spirit, and God has planted faith in our hearts that puts its trust in Jesus' atoning work. This faith planted by God receives the gifts of forgiveness and life – gifts for us and our children, all by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

soli deo gloria