



## HOPE COMES IN THE DARKNESS!

### HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY

3 June Anno Domini 2012

Rev. Steven D. Spencer - Pastor

#### John 3:1-17

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 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.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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.

In the name of the Father, and the Son (✠) and the Holy Spirit, Amen!

Today's Gospel tells us of a nighttime conversation Jesus had with a man who was near the top of his society. Nicodemus was a Pharisee; he was a member of the ruling body in Jerusalem also known as the Sanhedrin. He was a busy and important man.

There are several things we can learn from Nicodemus. Eventually, he would become one of Jesus' most loyal disciples – even arranging to take Jesus' body from the cross and placing it in the tomb where it would lie until Jesus rose from the dead. Nicodemus shows us that not all Pharisees were evil hypocrites. Many Pharisees saw the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, became some of Jesus' first disciples. And Nicodemus was one of them.

Today's Gospel seems to be the first time that Nicodemus and Jesus had talked. Yet Nicodemus is not a Christian. The occasion for this conversation is one of the many times that Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover. During His visit to the Temple, He had performed some exciting and inspiring signs. He had driven away the corrupt moneychangers out of the temple. He also preached a message that was faithful to God's Word, He taught in purity and truth with great authority. In short, He got noticed.

Nicodemus was curious. God obviously was with this teacher who spoke with such great authority – the signs He performed validated it. But was He simply a powerful preacher? Was He a prophet? Nicodemus was curious, Nicodemus wanted to know. Who was this man that created such tumult in the temple and drew attention everywhere else He went?

Nicodemus came to Jesus with a great deal of respect. He wasn't quite ready to believe that Jesus is Messiah, but He was ready to admit that He might be a great prophet. Even as a prophet, Jesus' words would be God's words. As the Holy Spirit inspired John to record this conversation, we have the opportunity to learn about the work that each member of the Trinity has in our salvation. The Father loves us and sends His Son. The Son saves the world and offers forgiveness, life and salvation to all, and

the Holy Spirit establishes and maintains the faith that receives and holds the gifts that the Son offers to us.

As Jesus began answering Nicodemus' questions, He actually worked His way from the end of the process of salvation back to the beginning. He began with the Holy Spirit's activity of establishing faith in us. We call this process *conversion*. The Holy Spirit converts people from spiritual death to spiritual life. Jesus said this process of conversion is a spiritual birth. After Nicodemus introduced himself, Jesus replied, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"** (John 3:3). Later, after Nicodemus asked for more explanation Jesus started over and added more details. *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"* (John 3:5-6).

I was fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to witness my wife give birth to our two sons. It would be an understatement to say that she worked really hard during the birth process. A mother giving birth puts forth an effort that would be labeled super human under any other circumstances. There's also the medical support team, doctors or midwives doing their part as well as nurses who provide proper support. As the husband I did my part coaching and encouraging and even catching one child. Everybody was busy doing something – everybody, that is, except the baby.

Now don't get me wrong. Babies endure quite a bit of trauma during child birth. All kinds of things happen to a baby when it is born, but the actual power that drives the birth process comes from Mom. She is the one who is giving birth. As traumatic as the birth process is for the baby, the baby itself does none of the work. It merely experiences the consequences of the work. The mom pushes the baby from the womb out into the world. I guarantee you that if a baby ever managed to give birth to itself by pulling itself out of the womb, there would be headlines around the world not to mention some very strange movies made of it.

Things are the same in the spiritual birth of conversion. Although a great deal is happening to us during this life changing process, we do absolutely nothing to make it happen. We don't decide to follow Jesus. We don't give ourselves to God. Just as Mom does all the work of physical birth, so God does all the work of a Spiritual birth. We do nothing. When Jesus answered, **"... That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,"** He was telling Nicodemus **and us** that just as Mom brings Junior into this physical world with a physical birth, so also, the Holy Spirit brings the Christian into the spiritual World with a spiritual birth.

So then, this faith, this new birth, this new spiritual life is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit alone. It's the miracle that God works in us. What is its benefit? Why does God go through all this effort to produce this faith in us?

The benefit of conversion becomes clear when Jesus finished telling Nicodemus about the work of the Holy Spirit and moved to the topic of His own work. Here He talks about Himself in the third person as He often did. He often called Himself **"The Son of Man,"** and He had this to say about the Son of Man: **"No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man"** (John 3:13). The first thing He told Nicodemus about Himself was that He was descended from heaven – a very clear indication that the *Son of Man* is also the *Son of God*. The first benefit that Jesus revealed to Nicodemus was the knowledge that Jesus is both God and man.

The benefit of conversion becomes even clearer when Jesus moved on to tell of the work He would do as God and Man: **"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man will be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life"**(John 3:14-15). Here's the chief benefit of the faith that the Holy Spirit works in us through conversion – eternal life. Whoever believes has eternal life.

And what do we believe? We believe that Jesus was lifted up on the cross just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. By His suffering and death, Jesus won eternal life for us. He offers it as a gift to us and we receive that gift by faith, the gift that the Holy Spirit works in us by the new, spiritual birth.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that only faith in Him can save. Nicodemus can try to keep the laws of Moses until he perishes from this earth. But, it will do him no good as far as eternal life is concerned. It's the same for us. As we have studied the Ten Commandments in Book of Concord reading group, we have learned that in reality we don't obey any of the commandments – we are zero for ten. What a comfort it is that whoever believes in Jesus Christ receives all the benefits that Jesus earned for us on the cross – forgiveness, life, and salvation by His doings and not ours.

And where is the Father in all of this? He is the one who loves, gives, and sends. ***“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”*** (John 3:16-17).

Here is the work of the Father. He loves us and sacrifices His only begotten Son to die for us. We cannot understand this kind of love. After all, we are the greatest corrupting influence in all of creation. We are entirely unlovable. But never the less, God loves us. His love forced Him to act on our behalf. In His love, He sent Jesus into this world to become our substitute – He sent His Son into the world to be lifted up on the cross ***in order that the world might be saved through Him.***

In this conversation, Jesus gave Nicodemus a lot to think about – more than we have time to consider today. He explained that it is the new birth by the Holy Spirit that gives us the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation that the Son earned for us on His cross. He proclaimed the Father's love that He sacrificed His only begotten Son for us. With these words Jesus explained that the Kingdom of God does not come to Nicodemus because he is a descendant of Abraham or a keeper of the Law, but because the Holy Spirit gives him the same faith that Abraham had.

The Holy Spirit used Jesus' words as He always does. He overcame the pride of Nicodemus. He softened Nicodemus' heart. Eventually, Nicodemus experienced the new birth as the Holy Spirit established faith in him. Nicodemus proclaimed his faith with his actions. Listen to what happened after Jesus died on the cross. John 19:38-42: ***“Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.”***

Nicodemus helped Joseph place Jesus' body in the tomb and what a joy it must have been when Nicodemus learned that the body he had laid in Joseph's tomb was no longer there – that his savior Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. What a joy it is for Nicodemus that he will forever enjoy the Kingdom of God that he received through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. What a joy it is for us who have the Holy Spirit's gift of the new birth that the day will come when we shall join Nicodemus around the throne of God in the eternal joy of heaven. For we know that through, Jesus life, Jesus death, and Jesus glorious resurrection that all of our sins are forgiven and heaven is our home.

In Jesus name, Amen and amen!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN!