

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST—HOLY TRINITY

John 3:1-7

Born Again Christians

“*Woe to me*”—the only reaction the sinful flesh can have, and Isaiah’s reaction, in the presence of Almighty God, when he finds himself in the middle of the heavenly *Common Service* arranged for him in the second lesson. Everything about God strikes terror in Isaiah, including the song of angels, “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.*” The Lord is holy and Isaiah is not. “*Woe to me*” is all a sinner can say.

Nicodemus knew this also. Nicodemus came “*at night.*” His very tactic cried, “*Woe to me!*” Christ was holy, and Nicodemus was not. Nicodemus didn’t even have the courage to come to the Savior during the day, when the other sinners whose Pharisaical judgment he feared perhaps as much as God’s might see him, because was ashamed to be associated with Jesus.

But you’d think Christ would take it easy on Nicodemus. I mean, at least he was showing interest after all. But, no, Christ confounded this frightened Pharisee. The flesh must be drowned, not enticed. The gospel is not a carrot for the sinner. No, the sinner gets the whip of the law. You can’t sweet-talk the flesh into faith. Faith is of the Spirit. So, before Nicodemus even gets to a question, while he is still trying to flatter his way into Jesus’ favor—favor given only on the basis of recognized need and not flattery—Jesus answers the unasked question.

“*Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.*” And Nicodemus responds, quite reasonably, with scientific fact. One cannot be born again of his mother, especially not a fully-grown man. But Jesus had said, “*Amen, amen...*” We don’t question things that get an “*Amen*,” we believe them. Reason doesn’t judge the “*Amen*,” the “*Amen*” judges fallen human reason. Nicodemus had to be born of water and the Spirit, and that was that. Why? “*Because that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*”

“*Brother, are you born again?*” “*Sister, are you born again?*” Many of you may have been asked this question before. We Lutherans are often somewhat confused by how the question is asked by many Protestants, and our answer often confuses those who ask it. But it is an opportunity to share the whole fullness of the gospel with those who do not yet understand it, who would make salvation an act of the human will and not of God. Yes, we can lovingly answer those who would inject their own works or reason or will into salvation with the very words with which St. John opens his Holy Gospel: “*I was born again as a child of God, ‘not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will, or decision, of man, but of God’* (John 1:13). I was born again and saved in Holy Baptism according to the will of my Father, by His Son, through the working of the Holy Spirit.” That, my friends, is pure gospel.

Many mock this idea that Baptism saves, even though St. Peter writes, “*Baptism now saves you*” (1 Peter 3:21), even though, in addition to His words in the text before us, Jesus says in the Holy Gospel according to St. Mark, “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*” “*You might as well pour water on a dog,*” the Anabaptists ridiculed Lutherans at the Reformation. “*That is superstition and magic,*” many claim today, and it would be, had it not been God who had chosen to use this means of grace, if we had contrived such a ceremony on our own. But God has given us Baptism, and it is for God to decide what is powerful and what is useless, what is a miracle and what is magic.

We must always remember when tempted to judge God’s means with human minds that Baptism is not our work; it is God’s work. As you probably reminded Mom as a child, you never asked to be born, and what is true of your first birth is true of your second. It never ceases to amaze me that baptism, like forgiveness and salvation, can only be spoken of in passive tenses. “*I am baptized.*” It

was done to me. "I am forgiven." It was given to me. "I am saved." It was accomplished for me. I cannot baptize myself, forgive myself, or save myself. Baptism is God's work, and there is nothing too plain or simple about it, because it is our immersion into the very death and resurrection of the Son of God Himself; it is the death of a sinner and the resurrection of a saint. Human reason may want to keep God in heaven, but He's determined to come to us on earth in earthy ways.

We will never surrender this comforting teaching of God's grace in Baptism—the gospel itself—if we remember that it is not because of Scripture that these poor souls reject God's gift, but because it offends fallen human reason, and if we remember what is at stake: not a mere sprinkling with water, but our very adoption as the sons and daughters of God. It is not some figurative bath that is rejected in Baptism, but the heart and core of the Christian life. Tertullian perhaps said it best: "We little fish, like our Fish, Jesus Christ, are born in water, and it is only by living in water that we are safe."

According to the flesh, everything about God brought terror for Isaiah, as he cried out, "*Woe to me. I am ruined*" But God's forgiveness touched his lip in a burning coal, just as God's forgiveness cleanses your lips in bread and wine, His Body and Blood, so that everything that before brought terror, including that song of the angels, which the Church now sings before Holy Communion, now brought comfort, so that he who would have fled from God answered, "*Here am I. Send me.*"

"Are you born again?" You most certainly are, and don't let anyone rob you of that. You are a baptized child of God [*touch forehead when stating this for the rest of the sermon*]. Has it been a little harder to believe when you pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread*" lately? You are a baptized child of God. You are an heir. He has given His only Son to adopt you. He will not abandon you. Has your mind been ravaged by confusion and fear, sadness and regret? You are a baptized child of God. God bought that mind when His called servant marked it with the sign of the cross and poured water on your forehead. Call out, not "*Woe to me,*" but "*Abba, Father.*" Has your conscience nagged you, accused you, stung you, all but convinced you that you belong to the Devil, for that is whom you've served? You are a baptized child of God. Drown those lies. The Devil cannot sink His teeth into those who flee to their Father. The Devil can only die in these same waters that bring you life. Are you weary from battling your flesh? Has temptation laid siege to you from every side? Has each day brought new allures of the flesh? You are a baptized child of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to Spirit. Starve the flesh and feed the Spirit. Get into God's Word. Confess to God's undershepherd. Fill your ears with God's promises so there is no room for the world's lies.

You are a baptized child of God. Prodigal as you have been, He waits with arms outstretched, eager to run to you, stomach churning with compassion and heart brimming with grace. If you think it is hard on you when you stray, you can't imagine how much harder it is on your Father. Return to Him, and He will return to you. You are born again, little child. You are born again, "*not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*" Dive back in those original waters of your Baptism again through repentance today, for your Father is ready and willing to wash you anew, and where water and promise meet, there the Spirit is active. There is nothing fancy you have to say or do, nothing new or dramatic. You did nothing in Baptism. God did it all, giving you all that now was yours because His Son had done it all. You are a baptized child of God. Simply speak the words of a desperate child who knows who alone can help, can heal, can make things better: "*Abba, Father.*" And it doesn't matter anymore what the world says. It doesn't matter anymore what that accuser the devil says. It doesn't matter anymore what the flesh says. It doesn't matter anymore what your beleaguered conscience says. All that matters now is that you can say, "*Abba, Father*" in this your time of need. You are a baptized child of God. Amen.