

The Holy Trinity: John 3:1–17

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In Nomine Iesu

Abram was 75 years old when he was uprooted by the call of God, taken from his comfortable home in Ur of the Chaldees and given to wander as an alien in the land of Canaan for the rest of his life. God made a three-fold promise, as covenant, with Abram. The Lord would make him a great nation, the father of many, even though at the time, Abram and his wife Sarai had no children. His descendants would inherit the land one day, the land that Abram lived in as a foreigner. And through the Seed of Abraham, his singular offspring, all nations of the earth would be blessed. Abram was blessed to be a blessing.

Abram believed God, he believed that covenant promise the Lord had made, and the Lord credited that faith in the promise as righteousness. That three-fold promise to Abram was the foundation of OT Israel – a people, a land, and promised Seed. It was a promise repeated from generation to generation, from Abraham to his son Isaac, to his son Jacob. It was a promise repeated to the nation of Israel, the sons of Abraham. It was a promise fulfilled when God sent His Son to be born of Israel as a son of Abraham. Jesus, the Christ. The son of Abraham, the son of David, the son of Israel, the son of God.

When Nicodemus came to visit with Jesus, rabbi to rabbi, a son of Abraham met the Seed of Abraham, the One through whom all nations of the earth, and all peoples, would be blessed. He didn't know that yet. To Nicodemus, Jesus was a new teacher on the block who needed to be checked out. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the ruling council. Perhaps he had been sent to investigate this upstart teacher from Nazareth. He had heard the stories, read the headlines of Jesus' signs – water into wine, the lame walking, demons cast out, lepers cleansed. Impressive resume. "No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Indeed, but Nicodemus isn't there to flatter Jesus with the obvious. There is something on his mind and heart. Perhaps it's that age old question that preoccupied the Pharisees: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus' reply certainly points in that direction. But Nicodemus never comes out and asks it.

He comes to Jesus as night. Let's not lose the significance of that. Night is the hour than no one can work. In the creation week, God spoke in the day, but the hours between evening and morning are silent. God also works in the light of day. Those who walk in the night stumble and fall. Judas betrayed Jesus at night. John underscores that fact. Nicodemus is "in the dark" about who Jesus is. As a Torah teacher, he should have known and recognized the Light and Life of the world, but Sin's blindness and Religion's presuppositions keep him in the dark. He is, like the rest of the Pharisees, blind to the Light that is shining on them.

Our catechism says that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or even come to Him. We are as in the dark, spiritually speaking, as Nicodemus. Jesus must open our ears, our minds, our hearts. He must give us the faith-eyes to see that Light and Life that has been shining on us all along. And so bit by bit, Jesus pries open the closed mind and hardened heart of the Pharisee, a man who has tried so hard to keep Torah and yet knows in the dark night of his own soul that he doesn't.

"Truly, truly, I say to you." Better to translate that "Amen, amen, I say to you" which is not really a translation at all. Amen is as sure and certain as it gets, straight from the lips of Jesus. "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Huh? What does that mean? Born again? Even more confusing, the word "again" can also be translated "from above," which makes more sense. Unless one is born "from above" he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus, who is in the dark about these things, hears it as "born again." "How can a man be born when he is old? How can he enter again into his mother's womb?" That's outrageously silly nonsense!

Again, Jesus' double Amen. "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born of water and Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh; that which is born of Spirit is spirit." Ah, now that makes more sense. Sort of. To be born of flesh is to be born "from below," as we all are born "from below" as children of Adam. If you are "flesh" then you are born from below, of the flesh. To be born of the Spirit is to be born spiritually, "from above." And not just Spirit but water and Spirit, for the Spirit is never alone. Even in Genesis, in the creation week, before God spoke, the Spirit, wind, breath of God hovered over the face of the watery Deep. Water and Spirit. It's right there in Genesis 1:2. Any Torah teacher, including Nicodemus, would have known that. Should have known that.

But the Spirit teaches spiritual things to those born of water and Spirit. These things are “spiritually discerned,” as the apostle Paul put it. The natural man, born of flesh, cannot comprehend these things, cannot come to know God, cannot believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him. These are heavenly things, and we are earthly creatures. We cannot reach up to God, no matter how many times or ways humanity has tried. God must reach down to us. No one has gone up into heaven but One has come down from heaven, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Son of Israel, Jesus our Lord. He is the Word become Flesh, the only-begotten Son enfleshed in our humanity. He is God reaching down to us, all the way down, to save us.

This is how God loved the world: He sent His only-begotten Son into the flesh so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God didn’t send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but rather to condemn Sin in the Flesh so that the world would be saved through His death and resurrection. He came to be lifted up on the cross, as Moses lifted up the bronze snake in the wilderness, so that by His death He might become the antidote to Death, the antiserum to the sting of Death, and the source of life for all men.

What Nicodemus hoped to find in the Torah is found in Jesus, the Torah in the flesh standing before Him, talking with Him. What Nicodemus wanted more than anything else, to see the kingdom of God and to enter that kingdom to life eternal, is found only in Jesus, the incarnation of God’s love for the world. And it’s not a matter of choice, or decisions, or good behavior, or anything else you or I might do. It’s a matter of birth, of being and identity. You must be born from above, a second time, not of flesh but of water and Spirit. You must become something altogether different, a new creation. Simply renovating the old Adamic flesh won’t work. Topical treatments won’t deal with the deep disease of Sin. You must die and rise in Jesus, be born in Him, and that is the work of the Spirit through water and Word.

Nicodemus shows up two more times in John’s gospel. As a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council, he spoke up in Jesus’ defense, a risky move on his part. And even riskier, Nicodemus went with Joseph of Aramathea bringing burial spices to help with giving Jesus a proper burial. By all appearances, the Spirit had done His work on Nicodemus the rabbi, now a disciple. Like Abraham, his forefather, Nicodemus was called out by God from his comfortable position as a Pharisee, teacher, and leader to wander the pilgrim way of the disciple, as stranger and alien to his own people. “He came to his own, but his own people did not receive him.” The nation rejected him. The ruling council, of which Nicodemus was a member, rejected Him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to

become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but born of God. Born of water and Spirit. Born anew from above.

You too are called “children of God,” born anew from above in Baptism. Like Abraham in Canaan, like Nicodemus among his own people, you are called out to be God’s people, a chosen people, royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s treasured possession. This is your identity in this world. This is who you are. Child of God, priest of God, heir of eternal life. This shapes your thinking, your doing, your being. This defines you, over and against all the ways the world has to define who you are, God has His Word. You are His child.

Remember that when Sin, Death, and devil cause you doubt. Remember that in the night, the dark night of your own soul, the night of doubt and despair and disbelief, the night when there is nothing no one but Jesus for you. You will see and enter the kingdom of God. The King has made you His child.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “2 Lent 2017 – John 3:1-17”, posted 2017-04-20 (<https://htlcms.org/2017/04/2-lent-2017-john-31-17/>).