

Holy Trinity

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John 3:1–17

If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? – John 3:12

Poor Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus by night to have a little rabbi to rabbi conversation. Compare theological notes perhaps. Talk a little shop, teacher to teacher. He even offers Jesus the highest of complements: “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.” Clearly, Nicodemus is impressed. Not bad for a Pharisee.

Jesus seems not to have even heard what Nicodemus said, but goes off in another direction. A heavenly direction. “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Poor Nicodemus cannot believe his ears. How can this be? Can a man enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born again? But Jesus didn’t say born again but born from above. Granted, the Greek word “anothen” means both again and from above. Nicodemus took it in the former sense, Jesus meant it in the latter. So much for all the “born-again” talk one hears in Christianity. The question is not “Are you born again?” but “Are you born from above?”

How does that work? Jesus explains, “Truly, truly, 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, and that which is born of Spirit is spirit.” To be born from above is to be born of the Spirit which is to be born of the water and Spirit in Holy Baptism. Flesh gives birth to flesh. That’s your birth from below from father Adam in which you inherited Adam’s condition of Sin. Spirit gives birth to spirit. That’s your birth from above in which you were born a child of God. Of the Father’s love begotten. Not only Jesus, but you in Jesus through Baptism.

John tells us this in the beginning of his gospel, the grand prologue that kicked the whole thing off: “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power 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 of God.” To be born from above of water and Spirit is to be born of God. And that is what you are, dear baptized believer. A child of God.

Poor Nicodemus. He’s in over his head, tossed into the depths of the wisdom and knowledge of God, and he can barely swim without his religious water wings. He doesn’t have a clue and can’t seem to connect the water and Spirit dots from Genesis 1. Water and Spirit go together. Combine water, Word and Spirit and you have light and life and new creation. But really, who can blame Nicodemus for missing the point? A lot of Christians miss the point too and think the new birth from above is dry, waterless, and “spiritual” in all the wrong senses of the word. Face it, you and I wouldn’t get it either on our own. These things are, as the apostle Paul said, “spiritual discerned.” Taught by the Spirit who imparts spiritual wisdom that is not of this world, the Holy Spirit speaking to our spirit by way of water and the Word.

How appropriate for Trinity Sunday, a day when we celebrate the mystery of God Himself, three divine Persons in one divine Being. Three in One and One in Three. A singular plurality and a plural singularity. It’s all enough to make your head explode as you recite the Athanasian Creed with all its “uncreateds” and “unbegottens” and “incomprehensibles” or at least to toss up your hands with Nicodemus and say, “What does this all mean?”

And that’s good for us. Trinity Sunday is a dip in the doctrinal deep end, a reminder that God is bigger than our heads, greater than our reason, and defies our tidy little categorical boxes. As baptized believers, we are born into a divine “mystery,” the mystery of God Himself. We are reminded that we do not image, invent, or otherwise cook up God, but God reveals Himself to us in our terms, in the Person of His Son Jesus.

The Son is really the centerpiece, the One on whom the spotlight is focused. No one has ever seen God, John says, but the only-begotten God, the Word Incarnate, the second Person of the undivided Holy Trinity, He has made God known. This is where Luther is particularly helpful for us. He refused to engage in philosophical speculations about God, though he was quite capable of doing so. He refused to deal with what he called the “hidden God” and stayed entirely with God come to us as the Son of the Virgin and the Man of the Cross. This is God in terms we can comprehend, who embraces us, who is born and suffers and dies, who is bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh.

We take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously because we take Jesus seriously. He is the One who reveals the Father, who sends the Spirit, who said, “Baptize in the Name of the Father

and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He is the One who said, “No one comes to the Father except by me” and “I will send you another Comforter who will be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth.” Were it not for Jesus, we wouldn’t have a doctrine of the Trinity or have anything to say about the Father and Holy Spirit.

You won’t get the Trinity right if you don’t get Jesus right. And you won’t get Jesus right unless you also get the Trinity right. The Father sends the Son to die and rise who sends the Spirit who leads us to the Son who brings us back to the Father. This is what it means to be born of God, born from above, born of the Spirit. The Father is our Father. The Son is our Brother. The Spirit is our Guardian, Guide, and Friend. We are caught up in a mystery that defies our reason and our senses, and reminds us, as Job was reminded, that God is God and we are not God.

Some people describe a sense of awe and wonder when confronted by a beautiful sunset, or the vastness of the oceans, or lofty mountain grandeur. We marvel and are amazed at the intricacies of biology and chemistry and physics. We are in awe of the pictures of space from the Hubbel telescope. But nothing we can observe with our own senses and contemplate with our reason can compare with the knowledge of God. We can try to analogize, because that’s all we have to work with, and say that God is like this or like that, but in the end our analogies will break down at the side of the road and not get us to our final destination. God must tell us who He is, reveal to us who and what He is for us. And that He has done in the revelation of His Son in the flesh.

The prophet Isaiah had the privilege of seeing the Lord sitting upon His throne, exalted and lifted up in great majesty. And yet words utterly fail him. He can’t describe God. He can describe the “negative space” around God, the train of His robe, the fire angels with their six pairs of wings, but he can’t describe God. There are no words. There are no analogous images. All you can do is fall on your face, confess your Sin, be absolved, and join the angels in singing, “Holy, holy, holy.” God is holy. Completely set apart from us, so utterly transcendent that we cannot look at Him and live much less describe the experience. And yet He has deigned to dwell with us as the Son incarnate.

Luther once remarked that the human heart is an idol factory, grinding out one idol after another for us to pursue. All those idols we invent for ourselves are gods made in our image, gods who look like us, think like us, do what we want them to do, affirm us. Gods that make

sense to us. Gods we can manipulate and bribe and cajole to do our will. Gods who are at our beck and call.

Not so the only true God. He makes no sense at all. Is He three or is He one? And the answer “yes” is somehow not satisfying to the mind that is closed tight by Sin. We would never in a million years invent the God revealed by Jesus and taught in the Scriptures. We would never in a million years invent a God that called for something like the Athanasian creed to confess. He is the God who defies our notions of both respectability and reasonableness.

Nicodemus appears two more times in John’s gospel. He defends Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the religious high court, of which he himself was a member. And he appears again at the foot of the cross, along with Joseph of Arimathea, to take custody of the body of Jesus and help prepare it for a proper burial. Somewhere along the way, Nicodemus was changed. This nighttime encounter with Jesus was the start of something much bigger than Nicodemus might have imagined when he first approached Jesus. The religious Pharisee becomes the disciple. Nicodemus literally loses his religion to gain a Savior.

There is not a single theologian who can honestly say he understand the Holy Trinity. And don’t trust one who says that he does. I certainly don’t. But God is not for us to understand, explain, or rationalize but to believe and to receive all He intends to give us. It begins with our baptismal birth, our birth from above by water and Spirit. And it continues forever with eternal life in the Triune God. You don’t have to understand God to receive His gifts, to be forgiven, justified, sanctified, glorified, to pray, praise and give thanks. The Athanasian creed doesn’t say “we understand” but “we believe” and “we worship” the Trinity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity, neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the Substance or Essence of God. Or to put it in the terms of the angels: Holy, holy, holy. That says it all right there. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.

Blessed be the Father. Blessed be the Son. Blessed be the Holy Spirit. And blessed are you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

SOURCE

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