

John 3:1-17

"Born of Water and the Spirit"

Lent 2 (A)

March 1, 2026

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Jesus said: ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"*** (John 3:3).

Nicodemus was a curious man. Nicodemus was seen as a holy man. He was a Pharisee, a rabbi of the Jews. He was among the most learned men. But he was also a man of much fear. He feared what the others among the Sanhedrin would think about him visiting Jesus of Nazareth. He feared that he would lose his position among the rulers of the Jews. But he was curious. He wanted to know more about this man named Jesus.

So, in his curiosity, Nicodemus did visit Jesus, but not in the daylight, but under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus came to have an open conversation with Jesus and to debate Him.

But unlike the typical Pharisee who was savage and malicious toward Jesus, Nicodemus wanted to have a courteous and proper conversation. He did not want to deceive Jesus with cunning, nor test Jesus with wicked intent, nor to catch Him in His words. Rather, Nicodemus desired to ask Jesus how a man could be saved.

So, they began their conversation discussing the righteousness of the flesh and that of the righteousness of the Spirit.

Jesus said to Nicodemus: ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God"*** (John 3:3). Or more literally, *"unless one is born 'from above' or 'unless one is born not of this world.'"*

And Nicodemus responded as any flesh-minded person would: How can this happen? ***"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"*** (John 3:4). That's a logical question. How could that logically happen?

But he missed the point. Nicodemus was thirsting for righteousness and salvation, but he couldn't get passed the idea of being physically re-born in his mother's womb.

But Jesus says in proper Lutheran terms “You don’t have to understand it, so don’t over think it.” ***“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’”*** (John 3:7).

Of course, Nicodemus was marveling at *“You must be born again.”* He didn’t like what he heard. He didn’t like it, because he couldn’t understand it. He was trusting his human reason, just as we so often do. How can he be born again when he is old? This sounds like pure foolishness! How could he become newly born?

To this, Jesus said to Nicodemus: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”*** (John 3:5).

I’m sure this sounded like a riddle to Nicodemus. And this may even sound like a riddle to you. This means nothing other than to die to sin and live to righteousness by faith and the Holy Spirit. Jesus, here, is speaking of Baptism.

You see, in Holy Baptism, the old man is drowned in the water and is raised up again. The drowning is the putting to death of the flesh and the sweeping away of sins. The raising up is the renewal of the new man in the Holy Spirit. All the while, the man is the same physically, but he is changed spiritually.

When the children of Israel were journeying in the wilderness and murmured because of the length of the journey, God was angered and sent fiery serpents among them that bit them so that many of them died. Then God told Moses to make for himself a serpent of bronze and set it up as a sign, so that whoever is bitten and looks at it will be preserved.

At first, the children of Israel didn’t understand what Moses had made. They probably laughed at Moses. But soon, they understood. Soon, they realized that those who were bitten and looked up at that bronze serpent were preserved from death.

Outwardly, that bronze serpent was not something that would give a lot of hope. Especially when the snakes kept on coming. Remember, God never took away the serpents. But God gave His people a way out. He gave His people the way of salvation. Even though they would be bitten, the bite would not kill them, because whoever looked upon that bronze serpent in faith would live.

This sounds like pure foolishness. But remember, ***“the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men”*** (1 Corinthians 1:25). For ***“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise”*** and He ***“chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong”*** (1 Corinthians 1:27).

You see, Jesus used that event of the bronze serpent to show Nicodemus how God works in the world.

God works in mysterious ways. He works in ways that our human nature thinks to be crazy. He works in ways our human reason cannot possibly fathom.

To the world, the waters of Holy Baptism appear to be just water – *to which it is*. But when that water is connected to the Word, to the very name of God – *the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit*, it becomes more than just water. It becomes a Sacrament. It becomes a way of salvation. Holy Baptism works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

Connected with the Word of God, Baptism becomes a life-saving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit. For as St. Paul proclaims in Titus 3: ***“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy saying”*** (Titus 3:5-8).

We may not truly understand it, but we believe it and we confess it. Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, we are born spiritually, and in spirit we are born by the Word and Sacrament.

It is through the working of the Holy Spirit indwelling in us as given to us through Holy Baptism that we become new people. We are born anew. We are born from above. We don't know how this happens, but we know this happens. For through the hearing of God's Word and by receiving His Sacraments, we grow into new people. We grow in our discipleship to Christ. We grow in living out the Christian life. We don't just believe differently than unbelievers, we live differently. All of this happens because of being born of water and the Spirit. For, as Jesus says, ***“that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”*** (John 3:6).

That bronze serpent was a strong visual reminder of the fierce wrath of God over sin. It was lifted high so that every Israelite might see it, repent of their sin, and look up to it in obedient faith. To everyone who followed this call, their faith resulted in the preservation of their life.

Again, God works in mysterious ways. That snake was a prefigure of what would happen not just for those Israelites of old, but also served as a prefigure for the salvation of the world. So, just as everyone who looked in faith at the snake was healed from deadly bite, everyone who would look in faith at Jesus – *high and lifted up* – would be saved from the bite of eternal death and have eternal life.

Jesus says, ***“Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”*** and ***“that the world might be saved through Him”*** (John 3:16, 17). Whoever is the promise. So, whoever – *no matter how bad, how despicable, how wrong, how lazy, how negligent* – whoever trusts in Jesus, whoever clings to Him in repentance and faith is forgiven and is given peace and eternal life. Whoever looks to Christ alone finds comfort, joy, and a sure and certain hope.

To those born of the flesh, to those who only follow human reason, this sounds like utter foolishness, but this is the power and wisdom of God; this is the way of the Spirit.

This is God’s plan for you and for the entire world. He wants to save you. He wants to heal you. He wants to comfort you. So, no matter how much those snake bites of sin attack you, remember that you born of water and the Spirit through your Baptism into Christ. Remember that when you repent of your sin, your sin is forgiven through the merit and work of Christ alone. Remember to lift up your eyes and heart to Christ crucified for you! For through His atoning death and bodily resurrection, He has given you peace. He has given you the fruits of His cross: forgiveness, life and salvation!

“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). Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +