

Baptism of Austin, Logan, and Chloe Stewart (children of Tracy and Angela)
Graduation Sermon for the Class of 2022

We read a portion of the Gospel, as follows in Jesus' name:

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, "... If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ... 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."(ESV)

This is Your Word, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen. (John 17:17)

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Especially you, Austin, Logan, and Chloe - Baptized this day...
and you, James, Uriah, Jacob, Joseph, Emma, and Jager, graduating today.

Toward the end of his book, St. John, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells us why he wrote his Gospel account:

so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. John 20:31

And we hear that Jesus has the same goal for His death, that being **lifted up** (on the cross),
...whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.

IF your eternal life is the goal and desire that Jesus has in mind for His earthly life and death,

AND your eternal life is the goal and desire of the Holy Spirit as He inspired St. John to write,
THEN your eternal life is also the goal and desire of the Christian Church.

It is the reason we gather together... the reason we preach... the reason we baptize...

the reason we commune... the reason we can rejoice (even while mourning) when a Christian dies...

It is also the reason that we maintain institutions of Christian education from PreK to 8th grade,
from high school to college... and even a seminary where future pastors are trained.

The Church does all these things **so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God;**

So that you may learn the only way of salvation that the God has revealed for sinners to be saved;

so that you may know the gracious Triune God who created, redeemed, and sanctifies you;

and so that you may grow in your faith and never lose hope.

But we must recognize that there is a difference between knowledge and faith.

Cain, who killed his brother Abel, knew God — yet, didn't believe in the Savior to redeem him.

Pharaoh, who endured the 10 plagues of Egypt, acknowledged God's existence, but rejected Him.

Even Israelites who saw the great miracles in the wilderness for 40 yrs. rebelled and would not believe.

And that is actually what we hear with Nicodemus in our reading today.

Nicodemus was an accomplished Pharisee, an expert in OT and religious laws, and Jewish traditions (today, we would probably call him a Dr. of Theology).

He knew the Messianic prophecies, those passages where God clearly promised a Savior to come into the world, and that described the work He would do.

But for all his knowledge and learning, he didn't/wouldn't identify Jesus as that coming Savior.

He believed that Jesus was **a teacher come from God**, because of the signs Jesus performed, but unimpressed, Jesus chastised him, saying, **We speak of what We know, and bear witness to what We have seen, but you DO NOT RECEIVE Our testimony.**

That testimony included St. John's call to repentance and Baptism.

St. Luke reports, **the Pharisees... rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.** Luke 7:30

And that's where Jesus immediately directs His conversation with Nicodemus.

As nice or flattering as it may have seemed to Nicodemus to confess that Jesus was **from God**, simply put, Nicodemus had been rejecting God's Word and, consequently, eternal life.

You see, John the Baptist, sent by the Holy Spirit, had been preaching and baptizing in the Jordan River.

Nicodemus' reaction to Baptism wasn't to consider the truthfulness of the messenger,

comparing what he said with Scripture, but instead to ask, **How can these things be?**

How can it be that Baptism forgives sins?

How can it be that this earthly thing of water makes one born of the Holy Spirit and gives spiritual life?... or as Jesus said, makes one "**born again**"?

How can it be that rejecting this spiritual washing, **truly, truly**, makes it so that **he cannot see... or enter the kingdom of God?**

...

Nicodemus was confusing knowledge and understanding with faith.

"The righteous shall live by his faith," Habakkuk^[2:4] said.

God does not reveal everything.

In fact, He told us through Moses, **"The secret things belong to the Lord our God,**

but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever..." Deuteronomy 29:29

So He does not expect us to know everything, just to believe what He has revealed to us.

Nor does He explain everything, and expect us to understand it.

... Jesus spoke of the wind: **The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound,**

but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

But just because we don't understand it, doesn't mean the wind isn't real.

...

The Christian faith is full of mysteries, things that can be known, but not understood.

Baptism is one of them, the Lord's Supper another.

And what we celebrate today, the Triune nature of God, yet another.

Can we understand how there can be 1 divine Nature or Being, yet 3 distinct Persons?

There is nothing in His creation that is exactly like Him.

Yet, we can know Him... who He is... what He is... and what He has done and is doing for us...

because He reveals Himself to us in His Word.

Which really gets us to the point that Jesus was making with Nicodemus.
It wasn't just Nicodemus' unbelief regarding Baptism that was so dangerous,
it was that he did not believe God's Word.

...

This is the danger for us, too.

We stumble, we misbelieve, we doubt, we disbelieve, we ignore, we even reject God's Word.

We want to understand it before we let ourselves believe it.

We want to stand in judgment over it, choosing what we will believe and what we will not.

This is the nature of the corrupted flesh that was passed down to you

from the corrupted flesh of your parents... as Jesus said, "**flesh gives birth to flesh.**"

May it be that these temptations and sins are only passing and very temporary,

rather than a sin that we nurture, feed, and indulge in,

for such a sin, as Jesus points out, does not lead to eternal life, but perishing in eternal death.

So let us hear the rest of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus and learn where to look for eternal life.

...

Jesus pointed Nicodemus to yet another mystery of God's Word: the Bronze Serpent in the wilderness.

Graduates, we learned this lesson in Bible History Friday, earlier this year.

The Israelites had once again rebelled against God and even complained about the manna,

so the Lord sent fiery serpents which bit and killed many.

When Israel realized their sin, they repented and asked Moses to pray that the snakes be taken away.

But the Lord didn't do this.

Instead, He had Moses make a bronze serpent, the image of the thing killing them,

and stick it on a pole and lift it up, so that those who had been bitten, if they looked at it, would live.

How many Israelites died because they would not look at the snake?

How many couldn't understand how looking at the metal image would make the venom harmless?

How many would not believe the Word of God?

Was it the metal that had the power?

Was it the person's will to believe that healed them?

No? What was it? It was the WORD of God. The promise that He had given.

Is it any different, then, with Baptism?

In his Small Catechism, Dr. Martin Luther even asks the "Nicodemus question".

How can water do such great things? And he leads us to answer and confess:

It is not just the water that does these things,

but the Word of God which is in and with the water,

and faith which trusts this Word of God in the water.

For without the Word of God the water is simply water, and no baptism;

but with the Word of God it is a baptism,

that is a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit.

And what is that Word of God applied to Baptism? His own holy Triune name.

As you are made a disciple and are baptized **in the Name of the Father and of the Son**

and of the Holy Spirit, you are made a child of God... and His Spirit gives life to your spirit.

In faith then, you see **the Father's only-begotten and beloved Son... lifted up** on the cross, the image of the thing killing you: your doubt, your unbelief, your rejection of His Word... your sin, and you see it being atoned for with...

... **the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleansing you from all sin.** ^{1 John 1:7}

You see the serpent's head being crushed as the Savior Himself was bruised. ^{Genesis 3:15}

And so, *Adam's likeness is effaced, while Jesus' image is imprinted in its place.* (ELH #125 & #593)

And like Nicodemus, the Lord gives you the sign of Baptism

(the physical reality that gives spiritual realities).

As Jesus said, **That which is born of the Spirit is spirit...**

As John wrote by inspiration, we are... **born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh**

nor of the will of man,

but of God. ^{John 1:12}

So the Church confesses:

And though our mortal eye is dim and sees but simple water,

Faith sees Christ Jesus, and in Him The Lamb ordained for slaughter.

We see the cleansing fountain, red With the dear blood of Jesus,

Which, from all sins inherited And our misdeeds, can free us; Eternal life bestowing. ^{ELH #247:7}

1st – He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.

2nd – **Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure... think about these things – [...w]hat you have learned and received and heard and seen ... – ... and the God of peace will be with you.** ^{Phillipians 4:8-9}

In Jesus Name. **Amen.**

Soli Deo Gloria