

June 3, 2012
Trinity Sunday

"Born Again to See an Awesome God"

JOHN 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven —the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

A little boy dug a hole in the sand on the beach. Then he took his little pail filled it with water and poured it into his hole. "I am going to take all the water in the ocean and pour it into this hole," he boasted. How long would it take him to realize this is an impossible task?

Today we see in front of us a man named Nicodemus who was more foolish than this little boy at the beach. He thought he could measure up to a holy and perfect God by the good life he tried to live. He was smart in the affairs of life but a total fool when it came to understanding the all important question of being right with God. Here he was holding his little pail of good deeds with the hope of being accepted by God whose holiness and perfection is wider than the widest ocean and deeper than the deepest sea.

And here we are on this Trinity Sunday unable to fully comprehend with our limited minds the glory of the Triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Our minds are limited as we try to measure the greatness of our God who created vast universes or the complexity of the tiny atom or the genetic disposition of the cells of our body. Our minds are limited as we try to plumb the depths of God's love that would send his Son to take every sin we ever committed on himself and be punished in our place for us. Over and over again we are overwhelmed as we contemplate the glory of our awesome God. Let's join Nicodemus

as Jesus tells him he needs to be born again to truly see how awesome and majestic the true God is.

The need to be born again

"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night..." Nicodemus was a Pharisee, that super religious group that believed with all their hearts they could earn God's favor and love by meticulously keeping Old Testament laws and extra layers of laws laid down by generations of rabbis. He is a respected religious leader but he does not know beans from buckshot about how he can be loved and accepted by a holy and perfect God. As the Apostle Paul said of his former life as Pharisee, "They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge."

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He was probably afraid of what the other Pharisees might say if they saw him talking to Jesus. He wants to know more about Jesus because he has heard of all the miracles he was performing. "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miracles you are doing if God were not with him." The miracles of Jesus sure got the attention of people didn't they? They created quite a buzz and quite a stir as people wondered if Jesus was a great teacher sent from God, or one of the prophets who had come back to life, or maybe even the Messiah who had been promised.

Read the New Testament's account of Jesus' life and you will meet a Savior who reveals his glory as God through the miracles he performs. It is time for people all over the world to throw away the little buckets of their limited knowledge that babbles and blithers about Jesus being a great teacher and accept him for who he is, Lord and God from all eternity.

Jesus is so abrupt with Nicodemus. It's time to take away his little bucket with its limited knowledge of God. "I tell you the truth no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." I like the words of the old King James Version. "Verily, verily I say unto you..." A boy in my youth confirmation class once asked, "Pastor, who is this "verily" person that Jesus is always talking to." The word "verily" is the Greek word "Amen" from which we get our word "Amen." Jesus is not joking or kidding when he says, "You must be born again to enter the kingdom of God." Nicodemus tries to make a light of Jesus' words as he suffers a brain strain: "Am I supposed to enter a second time into my mothers' womb to be born again?" Once again Jesus uses that word "verily" or "amen" to state clearly and forcefully that a person needs to be born again to enter the kingdom of God.

In his sermon on these words Martin Luther does a very good job of explaining what it means to be born again. He says that a child to be born two years from now is non-existent at this time in history. I thought of our son Daniel who was born while we lived in Tucson. He was a little fellow and we were showing him pictures of being in California of his brothers and sister. He asked the all important question, "Where was I?" He could not fathom a time when he did not exist. Jesus is telling Nicodemus all the good he was doing in his life to earn God's favor and love was not even part of existence. It had no worth or value to it. He needed to have a whole new life that comes with being born again and so do we.

Jesus reveals how desperately we need to be born again with the words, "Flesh gives birth to flesh but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Permit me to tell you something very personal about myself that is also true in your life. I was born into this world on August 29, 1947. My parents Carl and Lula Degner connected me to Adam's fall into sin through their parents Alex and Meta Degner, and Fred and Bertha Schroeder. Flesh gives birth to flesh. My parents did not have to teach me how to be selfish and sinful as a little child. I inherited that sinful flesh from Adam. I also inherited a corrupted sinful nature that foolishly thought God would love me if I tried to make up for the bad I had done with a little good here and there. I may have even shared a cookie with my sister and felt good about it. What an eye opener it is to realize even the good I try to do is corrupted by the sinful flesh.

What I experienced in my life has also been your experience. There is a saying "If it ain't broke don't fix it." That certainly does not apply to your life or mine. We desperately need the Lord to give us a whole new life that puts our hope and trust for forgiveness in a totally different place than ourselves. Remember the days when we took broken televisions to be repaired. Now we throw them away. You cannot repair your broken life of sin. You need a whole new life that comes with being born again.

No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. When you are baptized you are baptized in the name of the Triune God. I was born on August 29, 1947. I was born again into the kingdom of God through the waters of Holy Baptism on September when Pastor Otto Pagels poured water on me in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Titus 3 describes Baptism as the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Baptism connects us to Christ and his forgiveness. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ."

Jesus compares the working of the Holy Spirit through Baptism and the Word as the blowing of the wind. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. Just as it is impossible to take the water of the ocean and put it into a hole in the sand with this small bucket, it is impossible to totally comprehend just how the Holy Spirit works in people at various different times and places. Peter preaches one sermon on Pentecost and 3,000 believe and are baptized. A missionary works for years and only sees a handful of converts. Three years later we find Nicodemus taking the body of Jesus down from the cross.

The need to see Jesus

Being born again means that your eyes are opened to see Jesus as your Lord and God, and also the Savior the heavenly Father sent to rescue you. Jesus shows Nicodemus what a truly awesome and amazing God he has. He speaks of a God who would send his Son to be lifted up on a cross for our sin. "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" There were so many earthly things Jesus could point to as evidence he is Lord and God including the miracles that were bothering Nicodemus. Instead Jesus directs Nicodemus to heavenly things that would soon happen at the cross by using the example of Moses and the snake in the desert. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Nicodemus knew what Jesus was talking about when he referred to Moses lifting up the snake in the desert. Remember how the people were bitten by poisonous snakes because of their rebellion against God. The snakes were so toxic that lots of people starting dying a horrible death. Can't you see them running around frantically looking for home cures and home brews and home made medicines to get rid of the poison in their bodies? Can't you see a father cutting his son where the snake had bitten and trying to suck the poison out? So it is with every person who is still dead in sin and not born again. They are working at their home grown cures to make themselves worthy of God's love. How strange it was when Moses listened to the Lord's plan for a cure and lifted up a brass snake on a pole. People turned to it and lived. Jesus tells Nicodemus to think of that strange snake on a pole and then think of how he would be lifted up on a cross to save people from their sins.

God in his love and mercy opens our eyes to see how foolish we are for thinking we can do anything to rescue ourselves from the poison of sin. He takes away my little bucket with its limited understanding of how God could save me, and directs me to the ocean of love we see in Jesus as he gives his life on the cross for us. One of my favorite projects for Bible Camp has stones with little eyes looking up to a cross. God's wants everyone to look at Jesus and love. Later this man named Nicodemus looked up at the cross of Jesus and watched him die. His hands took the body of Jesus down from the cross and laid it into a tomb. All his life he carried with him the words that have become so dear to Christians of every age, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Amen.