

March 5, 2023  
Second Sunday in Lent  
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH  
Pastor Joel Sutton

John 3:1-17 (Genesis 12:1-9; Romans 4:1-8, 13-17)

## COUNTED AS RIGHTEOUS AND BORN FROM ABOVE

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

God has no pleasure in the death of anyone but desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (cf: Ezekiel 18:32; 1 Timothy 2:4) As our Old Testament lesson begins this morning, Abram was a pagan unbeliever, living in a heathen and idolatrous land. But when he was 75 years old God called him to leave his pagan gods and all that was near and dear to him, and move to an unknown place that God would show him. Even though Abram's 65 year of wife Sari was barren, God promised to make Abram a great nation, make his name great so that he would be a blessing, and through his descendants, all the families of the earth would be blessed. Holy Scripture records:

***“So Abram went, as the LORD had told him...”*** (Genesis 12:4)

Abraham's story is part of God's story of salvation. It teaches us that man does not seek out and find God. No. God calls man by His Word and He keeps His promises. Abraham deserved nothing but God's condemnation and eternal damnation but God called him to trust in His promises. Abraham was content living among false gods and his idolatrous relatives, but the Lord God demonstrated His grace and mercy, calling the unbelieving Abraham out of idolatry, setting him apart from the world of false belief to live by the promise of His grace. The elderly Abraham had no idea where he was going, yet he believed God's promises and followed the direction God provided by His Word.

God's promise to Abraham was the promise of salvation for all mankind through one of his descendants. But it was a promise that was mistakenly understood as being ***only*** for the ***biological*** descendants of Abraham. It was a promise repeated from generation to generation, from Abraham to his son Isaac, to his son Jacob, and to the entire nation of Israel. (cf: Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14) But it was also a promise that pointed back to the promise of Genesis 3:15 of the woman's offspring that would crush the serpent's head. And – it pointed forward to God's promise fulfilled when He sent His own Son to be born as a descendant of Abraham to defeat sin, death, and the devil, winning salvation for all the families of the earth. St Paul unpacks this in our epistle reading where he says:

***“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” “the one who... believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” “... it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace...”*** (Romans 4:3, 5, 16 )

Being a biological descendant of Abraham ***does not*** connect you to the Kingdom of Heaven. Your status before God depends on faith, in order that the promises of God rest upon His grace.

In our Gospel lesson, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin named Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness hoping to discover who Jesus really is. He says to Jesus:

***“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.”*** (John 3:2)

He says: ***“We know. We know that only someone from God can do these miracles.”*** Many of the Pharisees and Sadducees had gone out to see John the Baptist preaching and baptizing a water baptism of repentance. (cf: Matthew 3:4–12) But they did not believe they needed repentance. They believed their place in heaven was secure because Abraham was their ancestral father. (cf: John 8:31–39) John bore witness about the One who was to come who was mightier than he. (cf: Matthew 3:11) The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said:

***“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*** (John 1:29)

Word of Jesus’ teachings and healings had spread. So Nicodemus is wondering: ***“Who is this Man exactly?”*** But he does really ask a question out loud, but He did not have to. The omniscient Jesus knows His heart. He knows Nicodemus trusts in his relation to Abraham and his works of the Law for salvation. Jesus simply answers him saying:

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

In the original language the words ***“truly, truly”*** are literally ***“Amen, Amen.”*** (BDAG, 53) When you and I say ***Amen***, we are saying ***“Yes, yes, it shall be so!”*** (SC Art III, 21) We are affirming the power of God in His Word and promises. However, when Jesus says ***Amen, Amen***, He is doubly acknowledging the binding character and validity of what He is saying. They are His Words and that makes them valid and true. (cf: Weinrich, John 1:1–7:1, Concordia Commentary, 272) ***Amen, Amen***, most assuredly it is valid and true, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Complicating matters here is the fact that in the original language the words translated here as ***“born again”*** can also be translated as ***“born from above.”*** (BDAG, 92) Nicodemus is thinking of fleshly things, not spiritual. When he hears that he must be ***born again***, it sounds outrageous.

***“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)

He thinks all this talk is nonsense. But then Jesus once again doubly validates His words saying:

***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*** (John 3:5–6)

To be born of flesh and mortal is to be born ***from below***, just as we are all are born ***from below*** as fleshly mortal descendants of Adam. But Jesus is saying that this new birth is a work of the Spirit, who comes from the realm from above. To be born of the water and the Spirit is to be born spiritually ***from above*** and immortal. The Spirit teaches spiritual things to those born of water and Spirit. St Paul writes to the Corinthians:

***“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*** (1 Corinthians 2:14)

The natural man, born of flesh, cannot understand and comprehend the things taught by the Spirit. You cannot by your own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, or come to Him. So Christ Jesus sent you the gift of the Holy Spirit who has called you by His inspired and inerrant Word – the Gospel. He has enlightened you with His gifts, sanctified you and keeps you in the true faith.

As Lutheran Christians we read Jesus' words of being born again, born from above, being born of water and the Spirit, as baptismal language. Being born of the water and the Spirit is a work of God, drowning the fleshly mortal old man and creating a new man.

Because all Scripture is God's Word and God breathed, we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. St Paul writes to the Romans:

***"<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"*** (Romans 6:3)

He writes to the Corinthians:

***"... you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."*** (1 Corinthians 6:11)

He writes to the Galatians:

***"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."*** (Galatians 3:27)

He writes to the Ephesians:

***"... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word."*** (Ephesians 5:25–26)

He writes to Titus:

***"[God our Savior]... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."*** (Titus 3:5–7)

St Peter writes:

***"... you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God."*** (1 Peter 1:23)

He also writes:

***"Baptism, which corresponds to [the waters of Noah's flood]... now saves you... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."*** (1 Peter 3:21)

From the foundation of the world, God had a plan of salvation for all mankind. One of the very first Bible passages many youngsters memorize is John 3:16 where Jesus says:

***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*** [And He continues saying] ***"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)

Some people call this ***"the Gospel in a nutshell."*** Just to clarify, the Gospel shows us our Savior. The Gospel shows us what God has done for us and what He continues to do through Jesus Christ. The Gospel in a nutshell of John 3:16 tells us that God has taken all the actions necessary to give you a place in His family and His kingdom.

To be truly incarnate, Jesus had to be born as a descendant of Abraham and member of God's chosen people. But as God incarnate, His work of salvation would be for the whole world. His work of salvation opens God's kingdom to everyone, regardless of your nationality, ancestry, your good looks or your personality. Your assurance of being a child of God and your place in the Kingdom of Heaven **does not** depend on you. It depends solely upon the work of Jesus.

*"... as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness... [Jesus was] lifted up [on the cross, so]... that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."* (John 3:14-15).

The sin that is part of you is a deadly poison like snake venom. It infects you and the whole world, robbing you of life, making you dead and undesirable to God. Just as the snake-bitten Israelites in the desert could not escape death by making themselves unbitten, so too, you and the sinful people of the world cannot escape eternal death by your own works in making yourself un-sinful. (cf: Numbers 21:4–9) You must trust in Jesus. Look to Jesus in faith.

That is why Jesus came. On the cross, He poured out His blood as the anti-venom that takes away the sin of the world. Now – with the poison of sin gone, the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven are open to you. You have God's promise and assurance that you are His child and belong to His Kingdom of Heaven.

In Baptism, God called you out of your heathen and idolatrous life and set you apart. In the washing of the water with the Word, God adopted you into His family, put His Name on you, and counted you as righteous. At the font you received a washing of rebirth, born from above into God's family and kingdom. You were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. (cf: Romans 6:3-5) It is where God was doing what He promised to do: forgive your sins, rescue you from death and the devil, while at the same time gave you the gift of faith, eternal salvation, and the Holy Spirit. You have God's promise. You have His assurance. By His means of grace in the washing of the water with the word, everlasting life is yours.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,  
Amen.