

Sermon for the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity – John 3:1-15

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Nicodemis was a man of the Pharisees. He was a ruler of the Jews. As a wise and learned leader, he also saw that this Jesus must be a special man. But there was contention between the Pharisees and Christ. Without a doubt, Nicodemis had heard John the Baptizer verbally attack and rebuke the Pharisees sharply and harshly: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?!?” This Jesus was also doing the same thing: turning over money-changers tables, making a cord of whips and driving them out. Nonetheless, Christ did miracles – He had to be from God. What’s more, Jesus was right: the Pharisees were greedy and he’d sat through enough counsels and meetings to know that THEY were indeed a brood of vipers. But not HIM. Nicodemis had a great reputation: no blame against him; in knowledge, the wisest; in life, the most holy. Plus, unlike those other vipers, Nicodemis was pure. We might even think of him as diplomatic – a uniter. If anyone could bridge this chasm between Jesus and the Pharisees, it was going to be him. Nicodemis desired to speak with Jesus.

So he goes to the magnificent man from Galilee. Nicodemis is friendly, reasonable, gentle and pleasant. Flattery adorns his opening greeting: “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs you do unless God is with him.” However, before Nicodemis can get to the “...but...” as in, “...but why do you speak so harshly and rebuke us? We follow the Law of Moses come down from God as you do. We’re also working toward the Kingdom of Heaven – Don’t you know that we’re on the same team here?” before he could say any of that, Christ jumps in: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” It’s as if He said, “Your friendly flattery leads me to believe that you expect the Messiah to commend and praise your good works. You think you can repay God with your external holiness, pleasantries, and pretend fulfilling of the Law? Think again! Furthermore, our teachings are completely different! You teach about doing and not doing. I teach about becoming – that is, being born again. No new works, but actually becoming new! Not living differently, but being born differently. So don’t put the fruits before the roots! The roots and you must be new, good, and solid if the fruits and works are to be good! What does it matter if your foot and hand are healed while your heart is diseased and failing?!? No matter how wise, how virtuous, how excellent you may be, you cannot get out from under sin’s power and death’s dominion. You must be born a new man. You come to me thinking yourself to be honorable and righteous, but I tell you, you are full of sin and shame to the core!!!”

And we would be naïve to imagine that we are any better off than Nicodemis. Full of sin. Rotten to the core. Like Isaiah in the presence of the Almighty, we too are lost. We have gone down the wayward path of our own pet sins. We have unclean lips, speaking forth gossip and slander behind people’s backs. And while nice-guying and flattery will work with men – you can’t dupe God. “...[W]ho has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid?”

But that’s exactly the point: you can’t repay God, or please Him. So in His upside-down mercy, He gives to you. And it’s exactly as Jesus tried to explain to Nicodemis: first, by being born again. Next by the Holy Spirit who, like the wind, is heard but not seen. And finally, the beautiful illustration from the book of Numbers chapter 21. After being freed from Egyptian slavery, the Jews journeyed in the wilderness, a long way from bread and water. They

impatiently grumbled against Moses and God. Then God sent fiery serpents among them which bit them and many of them died. When they cried out to God, He had pity on them and told Moses to make a bronze serpent, similar even to the ones biting the people, and set it up on a pole. Whoever was bitten and looked at the bronze serpent would live. Ironically, the symbol of the very thing destroying them becomes the very thing that saves them. The metal itself certainly didn't help them, but the promise surely did: "Look on it, and you shall live."

Yet, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must also be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." We too have been bitten by the terrible venom of the devil, which is sin. Our sin is a poisonous bite which infects our life and attacks our conscience without rest. Sin leads to death. There is no help or remedy. No matter how many good works you do, you are still damned. That is, until the miracle of grace comes: Another serpent is lifted up and He in the form of a Servant. Jesus condemned sin with sin, drove away death with death, overcame the law with the law. How? He became a sinner on the cross in the midst of sinners. He suffers the judgement and punishment that we should suffer. He was innocent. He never committed any sin, and yet the blame and the guilt and the punishment actually falls on Him. He loaded the world's sin onto Himself. When He let Himself be judged and condemned as a sinner – He blotted out sin. He hung upon the cross as a cursed worm. But this form of a dead serpent is a saving death and immortality for all who are ruined in sin. Ironically, the very symbol of death, Christ on the cross, becomes the very thing that saves us from death. The wood itself certainly doesn't help us, but the promise does: "[W]hoever believes in Him will have eternal life."

Even if a thousand bronze serpents had been set up in the time of Moses, not a person would be healed without the promise. If Christ had died a thousand times on the cross, this would not save us without the promise: "[W]hoever believes in Him will have eternal life." This is OUR promise. By it we go to heaven. By it we have God's grace. By it we have victory over the power of sin and death. By it we have eternal life and are carried up. "Whoever believes in Him will have eternal life."

How does this happen for us? God has arranged it so that the Holy Spirit works in our ears and works in our eyes in Word and Sacrament through the external office of the holy ministry so that we know what happens has happened through the Holy Spirit. This Spirit still works in us by Holy Baptism. Whether we're being confirmed today, were confirmed last week, or decades ago, the promise of new birth in Baptism into Christ is first and foremost remembered in confirmation. "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always even to the end of the age." We acknowledge the gifts God gives us in Holy Baptism and confess Him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We live as baptized children when we grasp comfort in God's promise against our sin. We are born again. The promise is sure: God's Son came down from heaven and was lifted up on the cross for us, so that we have eternal life. And as we believe in Him we have exactly that. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠