

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

*“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.”*

How many times have we allowed these words to warm our hearts? How often have we heard them and kept their truth? And how frequently have we considered them in the context of Jesus speaking to a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who had yet to believe?

Nicodemus came to our Lord by night. This isn't an indifferent detail. John's Gospel plays heavily on the theme of light and dark. And so, Nicodemus came under the cover of darkness so as not to be seen by his fellow Pharisees and rulers, but doing so reflects his spiritual state. He came in the darkness of his unbelief. He was curious about this Jesus whom he has heard about.

Jesus had been in Jerusalem for the Passover. He made waves by forcefully clearing the temple, and making claims about rebuilding it in three days. And he performed signs so that many believed in his name. Nicodemus knew that Jesus could not do all of this by the mere will of man, so he came to Jesus to get an idea of who he was and what he was about.

*“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.”* Nicodemus believes he has an idea, but in truth he only shows his ignorance. Jesus answered, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anothén, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* Now this Greek word, *anothen*, has a couple of meanings. It could mean, “unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Or it could mean, “unless one is born anew.” Or, Jesus could have meant both at the same time.

Nicodemus, not yet perceiving whom he was dealing with, interprets Jesus' words as “anew.” *“How can a man be born when he is old?”* he asks, and adds, whether tongue in cheek or completely serious, *“Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”* To this Jesus responds, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of the 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 anothén.’”*

Born of the water and the Spirit. Water is another major theme in John's Gospel. In the next chapter, we read that Jesus Himself is and gives living water, and water is connected with the Gospel activity of the Spirit. Unless one is born of Christ and the Spirit, one cannot enter, or even see, the Kingdom of God. Let the weight of that sink in. Just as Jesus could not perform His signs by the will of man, neither can we come to, or even perceive, the Kingdom of God by the will of man.

For some reason we eagerly desire to be able to take the Kingdom for ourselves, to claim credit for following Jesus, or hold the keys to our salvation by making a decision to serve Him. But consider for a moment your own natural-born life. Was it an act of your own will that brought you into this world? Did your parents consult with you before they conceived you? Did your mother ask you if you were ready to be born into this world? No, even in this natural life we did not take life ourselves but were given life wholly as an act of will by another. How much more for heavenly life?

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above, born anew, born of water and the Spirit, he cannot see or enter the kingdom of God.”* You did not ask to be born either by the flesh or by the Spirit. Instead, you were conceived by your parents' will, born in their flesh. Jesus says, *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh.”* Unfortunately, this is not good news. David laments in the Psalms, *“I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”* Paul writes to the Ephesians that we are by nature born as children of wrath, and as children of wrath, we remain. That is unless one is born *anothen*.

Thanks be to God He loves us despite our sin. And thanks be to God, He did not consult us as to whether we wanted to be born of Christ and the Spirit. For before we were born in Him our spiritual state was utter darkness. We were under the power and domain of Satan, blinded and bound in his kingdom. We were dead, bent on our own sin and destruction. We were, indeed, sons of disobedience. If God had allowed us the freedom to make the decision to choose Him 100 times, then 100 times we would have refused Him.

But God, rich in mercy, because of His great love, even in our trespasses, reconciled us to Himself through His Son. God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. Through Jesus, God forgave us all our sin, setting it aside, nailing it to the cross! And then, without our asking, He sent us the Spirit so we may believe and be saved.

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We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son. Even more, now that we are reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. By His grace and grace alone, He has made us alive together with Christ and gives us His own Spirit to believe and receive this by faith! This is not by our own doing, by our own will that we are saved, but it is the free gift of God. As Jesus says, *“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”*

You did not ask to be born *anohen*; you did not ask for His salvation or draw near to Him that you might be saved. Your salvation does not rest upon you at all. Instead, He drew near to you in His Son. He took your sin and placed it upon Jesus, and crucified it to satisfy His wrath against you and your sin. Then, He took you and gave you new birth from above in Christ by the power of His Spirit, that you too may be born of water and the Spirit to be saved.

Remember what you were taught in the catechism, “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.”

Nicodemus did not yet believe when he had come to Jesus by night, but by the time Jesus was lifted up on the cross, Nicodemus had been born *anohen*, by the power and will of the Spirit. After Christ had breathed his last, Nicodemus, along with Joseph and Arimathea, came in the brightness of day, openly as one who loved Jesus, as His disciple, to collect, prepare, and bury His body.

Can we, as ones born of the Spirit, still care for the body of Jesus? He is no longer in the grave, so we cannot prepare spices and wrap Him in linen cloth as did Nicodemus. But we can hear and believe His Word, that we, the church, are now His body on earth. We can nourish that body by proclaiming His Word and administering and receiving His Sacrament. And we can grow that body by trusting that God really does love the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. And we can go out there with that message into the world, sharing the love of God in Jesus with those who do not yet believe so that they too might be born *anohen* and with us enter the Kingdom of heaven. Amen.