

# Season of EASTER

## Prayer

Let us pray for the whole church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

O blessed Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for our creation, redemption, and sanctification accept our thanks and praise that we bring before You this holy day: Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

O God the Father in heaven, for preserving our physical lives with the bounty of Your creation; for sending us needed rain to replenish the earth and to make it fruitful so that it might bring forth in abundance whatever is need to support our lives; for Your healing hand upon those who are sick and suffering; for those whom You have placed in positions of authority and government; and for pouring out Your loving heart to us and to all the world by giving Your own Son to be our Saviour . . . accept our thanks and praise that we bring before You this holy day: Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

O Jesus Christ, Son of God, for freeing us from sin and delivering us from the wages of our sins by being lifted up on the tree of the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sin, and for opening to us the gates of eternal life by Your resurrection from the dead . . . accept our thanks and praise that we bring before You this holy day: Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

O God the Holy Spirit, for making us children of God at our baptism and for keeping us in the one true saving faith in Jesus Christ through Your Word and the blessed Sacrament . . . accept our thanks and praise that we bring before You this holy day: Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

O blessed Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for preserving in Your holy Church even unto us today the confession of the true evangelical, orthodox, catholic faith by which alone we are saved, and for blessing the proclamation of Your holy name throughout the world whereby others are also born from above . . . accept our thanks and praise that we bring before You this holy day: Lord, in Your mercy; hear our prayer.

Into your hands O heavenly Father, we commend all for whom we pray in our hearts, trusting in Your mercy, through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, for You, O Holy Trinity, live and reign, one God, now and forever. Amen.

## Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever. Amen.

## Scripture Readings

Psalm 29

(antiphon v. 2)

Isaiah 6:1-8

Acts 2:14a, 22-36

John 3:1-17

## Hymns

Hymn of the Day – 498

Other Hymns – 507 (OT), 822 (E,

OT), 571 (G), 504, 506, 876



# PENTECOST SERMON

## THE HOLY TRINITY

May 30, 2021

**Sermon Text: John 3:1-17**

*'You Don't Have To Understand'*

Dear Ones who have been born of water and the Spirit in Holy Baptism,

“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” Poor Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus by night to have a little rabbi to rabbi chat. Talk a little shop, teacher to teacher. Perhaps compare a few theological notes. To start things off, he offers Jesus the highest of complements: “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.”

Clearly, Nicodemus is impressed. Not bad for a Pharisee. But notice . . . Jesus ignores Nicodemus' attempt to butter Him up. Instead, Jesus takes him in a heavenly direction. “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Poor Nicodemus, however, cannot believe his ears. How can this be? How can a man enter into his mother's womb a second time and be born again?

But Jesus did not say 'born again' but rather 'born from above.' To be sure, the Greek word means both 'again' and/or 'from above.' Nicodemus took it in the former sense, but Jesus clearly meant it in the latter. So much for all the 'born-again' talk one hears in various Christian circles. No, the question is not 'Are you born again?'; but rather 'Are you born from above?'

And how exactly does that work? Jesus explains: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of Spirit is spirit.” To be born from above is to be born of the Spirit; that is, to be born of water and the Spirit in Holy Baptism. Flesh, however, gives birth to flesh. That's your birth from below – a

birth joined with and connected with our sinful parents that stretches all the way back to Adam and Eve, to their, to our, inherited condition of sin. The Spirit, however, gives birth to spirit. That's your birth from above – born anew in the forgiving waters of baptism; born as a new creation in Christ.

In the opening chapter of his gospel, St. John tells us: “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” To be born from above, to be born of water and Spirit . . . is, in other words, to be born of God. And that is what you are, dear baptized believer in Jesus – a child of God.

But poor Nicodemus. He's in over his head, tossed into the depths of the wisdom and knowledge of God, and can barely swim without his religious water-wings. He doesn't have a clue and can't seem to connect the water and Spirit dots that go all the way back to Genesis, chapter one. Water and Spirit go together. Combine water, Word and Spirit . . . and you have light and life and a new creation.

But really, who can blame poor Nicodemus for missing the point? A lot of Christians also miss the point and think this new birth from above is some dry, waterless, so-called 'spiritual' thing . . . and in all the wrong senses of that word 'spiritual.' And face it – we would not get it either on our own. After all, these things are, as are, as the apostle Paul says, “spiritually discerned” — taught by the Spirit who imparts spiritual wisdom . . . heavenly things, not earthly things . . . and does so by way of water and the Word.

How very appropriate it is that we get this Gospel Reading on the Sunday of The Holy Trinity – a day when we celebrate the mystery of God Himself: three divine Persons in one divine Being; Three in One and One in Three; a singular plurality and a plural singularity. It's enough to make your head spins as you recite the Athanasian Creed on this day with all its 'uncreated' and 'unbegotten' and 'incomprehensibles' . . . or at least to toss up your hands with Nicodemus and say, “How can these things be?” Or, the question we Lutherans are conditioned to ask from the catechism: ‘What does this mean?’

But that's good for us. Trinity Sunday is a dip in the doctrinal deep end, a reminder that God is bigger than our heads, greater than our reason, and defies our tidy little categorical boxes. As baptized believers, we are born into the mystery of God Himself . . . and are thus reminded that we do not imagine, invent, or otherwise 'cook-up' God; but, rather, God reveals Himself to us in our terms – in the Person

of His only-begotten Son Jesus, who is really the centrepiece, the One on whom the spotlight is focused.

“No one has ever seen God,” St. John tells us; but God has made Himself known – known through the only-begotten Son of God . . . the Word Incarnate . . . the second Person of the undivided Holy Trinity. In Him, and in Him alone, is God known.

Martin Luther is particularly helpful here; for he refuses to engage in philosophical speculations about God, although he was quite capable of doing so. He refuses to deal with what he called the ‘hidden God’ and stayed entirely with the ‘revealed God’ who comes to us as the Son of the Virgin and the Man of the Cross. And this is God in terms we can comprehend, who embraces us, who is born and suffers and dies, who is bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh.

You see, we take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously because we take Jesus seriously. He is the One who reveals the Father, who sends the Spirit, who said, “Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” He is the One who said, “No one comes to the Father except by me”; and further, “I will send you another Comforter who will be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth.” Were it not for Jesus, we would have no understanding of the Trinity . . . or have anything to say about the Father and Holy Spirit. And so, you won’t get the Trinity right if you don’t get Jesus right. And you won’t get Jesus right unless you also get the Trinity right. The Father, after all, sends the Son to die and rise, and who sends the Spirit who leads us to the Son who brings us back to the Father.

To be sure, we are caught up here today in a mystery that defies our reason and our senses, and reminds us, as Job was reminded, that God is God and we are not God. Some people describe a sense of awe and wonder when confronted by a beautiful sunset, the vastness of the oceans, or a lofty mountain grandeur. Some marvel and are amazed at the intricacies of biology, chemistry, and physics. Some are in awe of the pictures of space from the Hubbel telescope. But nothing we can observe with our own senses and contemplate with our reason can compare with the knowledge of God.

We can try to analyze all this, because that’s all we have to work with, and say that God is like this or like that; but in the end our analogies will break down at the side of the road and fail to get us to our final destination. No, God Himself must tell us who and what He is . . . and what He has done for us – for you – through His Son who took upon Himself our flesh and became one of us.

In today's Old Testament Reading the prophet Isaiah had the privilege of seeing the Lord sitting upon His throne, exalted and lifted up in great majesty. And yet, words utterly fail him. He can't describe God. He can describe the 'negative space' around God – the train of His robe, the fiery angels with their six pair of wings – but he can't describe God. There are no words.

There are no analogous images. All you can do is fall on your face, confess your sin, be absolved, and join the angels in singing, "Holy, holy, holy." For God alone is holy – completely set apart from us . . . so utterly transcendent that we cannot look at Him and live, much less describe the experience. And yet, He has deigned to dwell with us as the Son incarnate – Immanuel, 'God With Us'.

Luther once remarked that the human heart is an idol factory, grinding out one idol after another for us to pursue. All those idols we invent for ourselves; however, are gods made in our image, gods who look like us, think like us, do what we want them to do, affirm us . . . gods that make sense to us, that we can manipulate and bribe and cajole to do our will . . . gods who are at our 'beck and call'.

But not so with the one and true and only God. He makes no sense at all. Is He three or is He one? And the answer 'yes' is not satisfying to the mind that is closed and blinded by sin. Never in a million years would we invent the God revealed by Jesus and taught in the Scriptures. Never in a million years would we invent a God that called forth something like the Athanasian Creed to confess. No, He is the God who defies our notions of both respectability and reasonableness.

Now, Nicodemus appears two more times in John's Gospel. He defends Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious high court, of which he himself was a member. And then he shows up at the foot of the cross and, along with Joseph of Arimathea, takes custody of the body of Jesus and helps prepare it for a proper burial.

Somewhere along the way, Nicodemus was changed. This nighttime encounter with Jesus was just the start of something much bigger than Nicodemus could ever have imagined.

The religious Pharisee had become a disciple of Jesus. He literally loses his religion to gain a Saviour. Did he understand everything perfectly? Well, not during this night-time meeting with Jesus! And today, as well . . . there is not a single theologian who can honestly say that he fully understands the Holy Trinity.

God, however, is not for us to understand, explain, or rationalize; but rather . . . to believe and to receive all He wants to give us. And that begins with our baptismal birth, our birth from above by water and Spirit. And it continues forever with eternal life in the Triune God. You don't have to understand God to receive His gifts, to be forgiven, justified, sanctified, glorified, to pray, praise and give thanks. Remember, the Athanasian Creed doesn't say 'we understand'; but rather: "We believe . . . we worship . . . the Trinity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity, neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the Substance or Essence of God." Or, to put it in the terms of the angels: "Holy, holy, holy." And that says it all right there – "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory."

Blessed be the Father. Blessed be the Son. Blessed be the Holy Spirit. And blessed are you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.