

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)
Holy Trinity
May 30th, 2021
Gospel – John 3:12 (Earthly and Heavenly Things)
By Pastor Hromowyk



In the most Holy name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. We hear these words of Jesus again from John 3:12, “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” So far the Word of the Lord.

Today’s theme asks the question: “how can?” Three different times this question was posed in our text. Nicodemus asks it twice: “*How can* a man be born when he is old” (Jn 3:4)? And “*How can* these things be” (Jn 3:9)? Jesus asks it once: “*How can* you believe if I tell you heavenly things” (Jn 3:12)?

In the Divine Service, there is a place assigned to sing a Psalm appointed for the day between the Old Testament reading and the Epistle. We have not done this yet at Zion, but if we did, the Psalm appointed for this Holy Trinity Sunday is **Psalm 29** where David begins, “**Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; worship the LORD in splendor of holiness**” (vv. 1-2). Ascribe means to give credit where credit is due so to speak; to confess what is true even if we cannot understand it by our own reason or strength. And that is precisely what we do on Holy Trinity Sunday. We cannot by our own reason or strength comprehend the divine majesty; we cannot understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity, yet we ascribe the glory due to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by God’s grace through the faith He bestows on us.

The Athanasian Creed, which we confessed today, is not long-winded as some suppose that it might bore the Church, but instead is precisely detailed to ensure that everyone can rightly confess who our Triune God is as revealed in the Scriptures. Notice that at the end of the Creed, we didn’t confess, “This is the catholic faith; whoever does not fully understand and comprehend it cannot be saved.” Instead we confess, “This is the catholic faith; whoever not *believe* it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved.” The catholic faith, rightly understood, is that which the true Christian Church has believed at all times and places. If we get God wrong, we get the promise of salvation wrong. It’s important to know and confess God for who God is!

Though reason and strength cannot comprehend the fullness of the divine majesty, even a child can grasp it by faith. Even the littlest of children can ascribe to the Lord that there are three persons, but only one God. As Job’s friend Elihu rightly confessed, “... **the breath of the Almighty, that makes [a man] understand. It is not the old who are wise, nor the aged who understand what is right**” (Job 32:8-9). In other words, though we have limitations in our understanding, to rightly confess who God is can only come through the gift of faith that is given by the Holy Spirit. Though a man or woman accumulate years of earthly wisdom and experience, in regards to confessing the Faith those things mean nothing apart from God’s grace whereby He procures and sustains faith. Often times the answer to the question, “How can?” is not a matter of understanding by reason or experience, but simply confessing, “God can” because as Jesus says in **Mark 10:27**, “**With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.**”

And that brings us to our Gospel reading today. Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel came to Jesus by night, so his fellow members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, would not know about it. He rightly made the connection between Jesus’ deeds and His person. Nicodemus says, “**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**” (Jn 3:2). Though the text doesn’t say this, there was obviously some misunderstanding on Nicodemus’ part because Jesus doesn’t affirm or confirm this confession. Instead Jesus gives him one of his – to use King James’ English – “Verily, verily, I say unto you” statements, which essentially means colloquially, “Listen closely, I’m going to set you straight here.”

And Jesus says, “**Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God**” (Jn 3:3). It’s as if Jesus said, “You, Nicodemus, might see with your eyes the miracles I do, but apart from being begotten from above” –

which is the literal sense of the Greek – “you cannot actually see God’s kingdom. For My kingdom on this side of glory is seen only by the eyes of faith!”

It is obvious Nicodemus doesn’t get it – he doesn’t have the eyes of faith. So he asks his first, “How can” question: “How can a man be begotten when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be begotten?” Notice, I substituted the word, “begotten” there for “born”, because the text is driving home the point that only fathers beget. And recall at the end of our Gospel reading today, John writes, **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His *only-begotten* Son, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16)**. The connection here is that spiritual rebirth can only come from God who not only has begotten His Son “before all worlds” as we confess in the Creed, but also has begotten you through Baptism, by His grace, the promise received through faith!

Nicodemus has an earthly world view! It’s why he hears Jesus’ analogy of being begotten again or born again or begotten or born from above, however you want to translate it, and assumes Jesus must be talking about physical birth! To use a token phrase we hear a lot today, Nicodemus is espousing Jewish privilege. He thinks his mere Jewish birth grants him entrance to God’s kingdom. It’s why the idea of a second birth is so absurd to him. “Why be born again? My first birth is all I need!” Nicodemus has his focus on earthly things. With such spiritual blinders, he’s trying in vain to figure out the “how can”; how can Jesus be doing the signs that He’s doing?

Jesus will not have this realm of the earthly conversation. He responds with a second, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5)**. That verse is John 3:5. This verse should *always* make you think of another “3:5”; **Titus 3:5: “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal from the Holy Spirit.”** Being born of water and the Spirit is the same as being washed by the Holy Spirit. And the washing of the Holy Spirit regenerates and renews; that is, He begets us from above. Those two verses, John 3:5 & Titus 3:5, held up together side by side are clearly talking about nothing other than... Baptism!

Jesus is teaching Nicodemus about entrance into God’s kingdom. It’s not by physical birth – it’s by spiritual birth – water and the Word by which God begets His people into His family. This is why Jesus says in **v. 6-7, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don’t marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again”, or “begotten from above.”**

Yet Nicodemus asks his second, “How can” to this: **“How can these things be” (Jn 3:9)**. Remember Nicodemus isn’t a recent convert. This isn’t some guy fresh to the Faith who hasn’t been properly instructed in matters of trust. He’s a teacher of Israel! He should have known better, which is why Jesus poses *His* “how can” question, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things” (Jn 3:11-12)?**

Those who reject that Jesus is talking about Baptism in John 3:5 – the verse about being born of water and the Spirit – try to make the case that Jesus never mentions Baptism or faith. But the two verses I just read are why Jesus doesn’t clearly spell it out for Nicodemus. If this teacher of Israel won’t believe the earthly things – the idea that his physical birth is not what grants him entrance into God’s kingdom – how would he believe if Jesus told him the heavenly things? That is, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with the water and the Word regenerate and renew a person in the waters of Baptism, by grace alone received by faith alone? Those are the heavenly things!

Thus how this applies to you today is the warning not to stumble over the earthly things and to trust the heavenly things. The mysteries in the Bible are called mysteries for a reason. Whether it’s the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, Baptismal regeneration, even the article of the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body – these cannot be grasped by earthly things or in an earthly way. They are a mystery to all reason and experience. Therefore, John Ch. 3 is teaching us to trust God’s Word. Trust the heavenly things. Trust the Gospel that operates in ways completely contrary to reason and experience. We pray and trust that God answers what we prayed in the Collect: “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!” Those adversities are precisely the reason and experience that Satan uses to tempt us to doubt God’s Word. God has given us heavenly treasures! God has given us new life in

Baptism, forgiveness of sins in Holy Absolution, the strengthening and preservation of both body and soul in the Lord's Supper. Maybe, just maybe, sharing the Body and Blood of Jesus under the bread and wine this past year, while the earthly way of thinking was a COVID risk, might instead actually do what it promises to do: maybe, just maybe receiving Jesus' body and blood for the forgiveness of sins has actually been good for both body and soul. The forgiveness of sins is always exactly what we need; for the good of both body and soul no matter what our circumstance. And our Triune God comes to us in Word and Sacrament constantly offering it. *How can* we ever believe such heavenly things? **“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ” (Rom 10:17)**. Keep receiving God's Word. It is the means by which God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit grants, strengthens, and sustains true faith unto life everlasting. In Jesus' name, Amen.