

7 June 2009  
The Feast of Holy Trinity

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Driven to the Cross”

Text: John 3:1-17

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

How many of us wouldn't like an opportunity like Nicodemus had. To sit down with Jesus, one on one, and talk. No distractions, no crowds, no beggars crying out for mercy, no people tugging at Him for healing. And Nicodemus was well-qualified for such a conversation - he was a teacher of Israel; perhaps today he would have a Ph.D. in theology.

But this night was more than he bargained for. Before Nicodemus could even ask a question, Jesus takes the conversation over and takes Nicodemus where He wants him to go. Where Nicodemus needs to go.

For this is how God works. He drives the conversation with us - not the other way around. In the beginning, at creation, God drove the conversation - He spoke and it is so. It was God who drove the conversation with Adam and Eve after they sinned, and with all the Old Testament saints, like Abraham and Moses and Isaiah. When it came to our re-creation, our redemption, God drove the conversation - He sent His Son, the Word made flesh, into the world, to save a world lost in sin. And so should we be surprised that the same is true with us today - with you and your life, it is God who drives the conversation. For if you think of your life as an ongoing conversation with God, it has this rhythm. God speaks and we listen. God gives and we receive. We breathe in His Word, and then breathe out His Word in prayer and praise. And in this conversation of life, we are filled with questions - why things happen; why other things don't happen. There is much we would like to know.

But like with Nicodemus, it is not we who drive our conversation with God - He is in control. He takes us where He wants us to go; where He knows we need to go. And so through the events in our lives, through all the ups and downs, through all the twists and turns, through all the Word we hear, our conversation is driven by God - that He may give us what we need: namely, Himself. Our triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is driving the conversation so that we may believe, and believing have eternal life.

And so as much as we would like to drive the conversation, it is better that we don't. For when we do, it is all about what we know, and what we *want* to know. But when God drives the conversation, it is about what we *don't* know and don't even know enough to ask! That's why Nicodemus doesn't even understand what Jesus is telling Him. Born again? He's thinking of husbands and wives and human birth and the things he knows. Earthly things. But Jesus is telling Him of heavenly things. And with these words, telling Nicodemus that sinful men don't just need a little work, a little revision, a little improvement - we need a new birth. A whole new start. A death and resurrection. For, Jesus said, ***unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.***

Now, we usually think of heaven when we hear those words, but to ***see the kingdom of God*** means *more* than simply going to heaven - it is to see the kingdom of God for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Not only His **kingdom of glory**, but also His **kingdom of power**, by which He is working and ruling all things in this world with His power for the good of His own, and His **kingdom of grace**, His Church, where our good and gracious God is working and ruling with His grace, giving His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Unless we who are blinded by sin are born again from above, we will be like Nicodemus - not even able to see the kingdom of God sitting right in front of us! [Point to the Font and the Altar] Sitting right in front of us.

So what is this new birth? This birth from above? Well, think of babies. We have several here. A baby is a new person who must learn everything - how to see, how to hear, how to walk and talk. They are rocked in a cradle, carried on the arm, cleaned when they mess themselves, and grow. And this is what we are. As we are born again from above, we are new people who must learn, grow, be carried on the arms and rocked in the cradle of the church . . . and yes, be cleaned, forgiven, when we mess ourselves. We are new people. Not the same old people. New people.

And this is not something we do - again, we don't even know what we need. God is driving the conversation of your life. And so just as you were brought into this world physically by another, so it is spiritually as well. It is, Jesus said, by water and the Spirit. It is in Holy Baptism that you were born again from above and given a new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That through that water where your Saviour has attached His Word and promise, your old man is put to death with Jesus, and a new man brought to life in His resurrection.

Now, some people think that's asking too much of baptism; of a little water splashed upon someone's head. And it would be if it were just plain water. But where the Word and promise and Spirit of God is, anything but new life is too little!

But Nicodemus didn't get it. His Ph.D. wasn't doing him any good this night. And so Jesus gives Him a picture of what He means - the bronze snake in the wilderness. Remember your Sunday School lessons, Nicodemus? When Israel was mired in rebellion and sin, they could not get themselves out. They could not rescue or save themselves. They wanted to! Oh, did they want to! Those serpents biting them were painful and deadly. And that is our situation still today as well - people today are trying to overcome sin in all kinds of ways and create utopias in this world where we can live beyond the reach of sin. But all our attempts fail. Because while you may be able to separate yourself from all those sinners "out there", you cannot escape the sinful poison coursing through your own veins. You cannot escape the truth that wherever you are, sin is. Israel dying in the wilderness is a picture of us. For the same satanic serpent that bit Adam and Eve, and that bit the people in the wilderness, is still working and biting us in our lives as well. Injecting the potent and powerful and deadly venom of sin into us.

But as powerful as sin is, there is an even more powerful antidote. That comes not from us, but from God. That comes not from within us, but from outside of us. That comes from God, who ***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.*** Saved by taking our condemnation and death away from us and putting it all upon Himself. That it be on Him and therefore not on us. Jesus did that for *all people* on the cross. He did it *for you* in Holy Baptism. And having our spiritual blindness healed as we are born again from above, we look to the cross - as Israel looked to the snake on the pole - and live.

And so your baptism is a great and powerful thing. And know that there are no stillborns with the God. The author and giver of life keeps His Word. He speaks and it is so. That some depart from this faith is also a reality - one that we wish was not so. But that does not lessen God's love or power for us in Jesus. When we drive the conversation with God, we want to know why does this happen? How? But Jesus drives us in a different direction - to His cross. To see the power of sin that was borne by Jesus, but to see that power overcome and defeated. Not that we have all the answers, but so that we have the answer that we need. So that we have the life that we need. That ***whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.***

But believe what? We confess it each week in the Nicene Creed. We will confess it today in the Athanasian Creed. That our triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is driving the conversation of our lives, that we may hear, that we may see, that we may believe. That you believe in God's Word made flesh on the cross, for you. That you believe God's Word of forgiveness spoken to you. That you believe God's Word in the water which gives you new life. That you believe God's Word which makes mere bread and wine into His life-giving body and blood, for you to eat and to

drink. That you believe His love, and that all this is *for you*. That your life is not about what you do, but what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have done for you.

For Satan doesn't care who you are. Whether you have a Ph.D. or never finished High School. Whether you are wealthy or poor. Whether you are young or old. He is an equal opportunity killer who doesn't care who you are because no human can overcome him on their own. No good work, no strength of ours can stand against him.

But there is One who can, and who did! Who spoke against him in the Garden, who spoke against him in the wilderness, and who speaks against him now. Who speaks a powerful Word! Our Saviour, the Son sent from the Father who is working in us still through His Spirit, exorcising Satan from us in baptism, breaking his power in forgiveness, and giving us a transfusion of His blood - that the old sinful, poisonous blood coursing through our veins be replaced with His life-giving blood.

For if Satan is an equal opportunity killer, Jesus is an equal opportunity life-giver, who has come to give His life to all. That *all* - bar none! - that you may be born again from above. No longer hopeless, but hopeful. Not longer dead in your sin, but alive in Christ. No longer blind, but filled with the light of life. That born as children of God here, we may live as children of God forever.

Nicodemus got more than he bargained for that night with Jesus. Perhaps we could say it turned his life upside-down. But if you're upside-down in sin to begin with, doesn't that mean Jesus is really turning you right-side up? Then that's a good thing. Not an easy thing! Faith is often a struggle, as so much of what we see and feel contradicts what faith believes. But while there are many things we do not know and cannot understand, the cross shines in the midst of it all, saying: But you do know this. Here is God for you. Here is God's love for you. *Love to the loveless shown that they might lovingly be.* (LSB #430 v.1)

And so with Nicodemus and with you, it is to the cross that Jesus is driving the conversation of your life, in all that is happening, that you may look to Him and live. That all that He is, He give to you. That you have what you need most, and know how stunningly much God loves you. That you join your voice with the saints of ages past and those still to come, and confess: *Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity. Let us give glory to Him because He has shown His mercy to us.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds

through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.