

20 March 2011
Lent 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Gift Given, Gift Received, Gift Confessed and Lived”
Text: John 3:1-17 (Genesis 12:1-9)

(This is a re-preachment of a sermon from three years ago with some small modifications.)

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

In the Holy Gospel that we heard today, Nicodemus asks the wrong question. For instead of asking, *“How can a man enter again into his mother’s womb?”* he should have asked: *“If this is what is required, how will God accomplish it?”* Here Nicodemus shows us the malady that is so strong in each and every one of us: when faced with the things of God, we look first to ourselves – to our wisdom, to our strength, to our abilities – to do what needs to be accomplished, instead of to God. And so Nicodemus thinks first, *“How can a man do this?”* instead of *“If this is what is required, how will God accomplish it?”*

This is so because it is the nature of sin to curve us in on ourselves. The same sin in us that causes us to be selfish instead of selfless towards others, also causes us to look to ourselves for what we need instead of looking to God. It is a danger even for the strongest and most experienced of Christians. To rely on ourselves and what we can do in the things of salvation – *our* good works, *our* faithfulness, *our* dedication, even *our believing* – instead of relying upon God and what *He is doing* and *has done* for us and for our salvation.

And so especially during this Lenten season, the Word of God helps us to see ourselves rightly. That we learn of ourselves, our weakness and need and spiritual inabilities, and learn of Christ and His work – His work **for** us, **in** us, and **through** us. The work of salvation that only He can do.

And so it is with Nicodemus. He comes under the cover of darkness to learn from Jesus, calling Him a *“teacher come from God.”* Which is (to be honest) high praise, and not a small thing for a Pharisee, a teacher of Israel, to say. *But he has no idea what he is about to learn!* Both about himself, and also about Jesus, who is *much more* than a *teacher come from God*, and *much more* than a person whom *God is simply with* – but is God Himself in flesh and blood! The King of Creation come down into His creation to rescue it. The Almighty God come down from Heaven in weakness and humility in order to raise up His weak and helpless children from

their sin and death. That God would do such a thing is not even on the radar screen of Nicodemus' mind. Jesus must lead him down this road to see both himself, and God, rightly.

The same is true with us. For what sin has done is not only make us think *less* of God than we ought, it has also made of think of ourselves *more highly* than we ought. (And it *constantly* tries to make us think in that direction!) And so many folks go to church on Sunday expecting to hear of what we have to do, to accomplish, to perform, in order to please God, in order to be saved. Because sin has warped our thinking – and not just a little! But 180 degrees. And so we now, by nature, fix our eyes upon ourselves, instead of upon Jesus, *the founder and perfecter of our faith* (Gradual). And so Nicodemus' story is a good one to hear during Lent, for there is a little wrong-thinking Nicodemus in us all.

And so in order to re-orient Nicodemus' thinking, Jesus speaks of being born. For just ask little Juliana - there is nothing quite so much that we have *absolutely nothing* to do with than being born! It is all the work of others, which happens to you; which you receive. All that is asked of a baby when it is born is to breathe and cry and eat and live the life that it has been given. . . . And so it is with the things of God, Nicodemus. There is nothing a man can do in order to be born from above, in order to have spiritual life. It is all the work of another. It is all the work of God, *by water and the Spirit*. It is life given, not chosen. It is life received, not achieved.

But so distorted is Nicodemus' thinking that he doesn't get it. Even when speaking of birth, he looks to *what the one being born can do* in order to accomplish this. And so it is with many people today – including sometimes even you and me. **This strange teaching striking the eardrums of many in a decibel range somewhere between irrational and unbelievable!** That if we are to be born of God, God must do it. That if we are to have eternal life, God must give it. That if we are going to rise to God, God must first come down to us. That when it comes to your spiritual life, you had nothing to do with it. That in response to the fact that we are here today, we can say only *thanks be to God*. This is a truth that must be revealed to us.

Well, Nicodemus is being broken down. He does not yet understand, but he abandons his own efforts. He sees himself rightly, but he does not yet see God rightly. And so he asks, "*How can these things be?*" The Spirit of which Jesus had spoken has been working. For now Nicodemus' ears are open. Now he is ready to listen and not do. Now the hopelessness in his heart can be filled with the hope and good news of Christ. . . .

And again, so it is with you and I. **As long as we have hope in ourselves, you can be sure that we will hope in ourselves!** The Law of God must first break us down, so that we see ourselves rightly, and then see our Saviour rightly. For only when we

have no power, will we realize and give thanks for the power of God. And that God would use His power not to condemn us, but to save us. *That God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*

For here's what it all boils down to: when you just heard that verse, John 3:16, one of the best known (if not the best known) verses in all of Scripture, did you hear that as a verse about what you have to do: *believe* – or what God has done for you: *giving* His only Son, a gift received by faith? At the beginning of their conversation, Nicodemus would have heard the former; but by the end, he heard the latter.

For Jesus is not just a teacher sent from God to teach us what to do, or to show us our potential – He is the Son of God come to save us from our sins. Come to die our death, that we might live. The Son of God come down from Heaven, that by the water and the Spirit of Holy Baptism, we might be born again and born from above as children of God. All His doing, the One who came to die and rise for us. All His doing, who came down from Heaven, that we might ascend to Heaven with Him. All His doing, so that we not doubt, but rejoice in the gift of His life, lived **for** us, and now given **to** us.

And what is now asked of you is simply to live this life that has been given to you.

To breathe the Word of God, to cry out in prayer, and to eat and drink the food your Saviour has provided for you – His very body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sin. To live the life of Christ and not turn to the death of sin. To repent of yourself and your power, your sin and your selfishness, your wrong focus and pride, and *fix your eyes on Jesus*. And as St. Paul said, boast only in Him. For where you boast shows where is your faith.

And so we gather here today as we gather here every Sunday – not to give, but to receive. To receive the life of God through the forgiveness of our sins. To receive the death and resurrection of Christ that we might die to sin and rise to new life in Him. To receive the Word and Spirit of Christ, that we, like Abram, might leave the old and journey to the new. A new life not far away, but which has been brought here to us. For your Saviour is here for you. And where He is, so is your life, your forgiveness, your salvation.

And so we learn of faith, which could be summarized very simply like this: *gift given, gift received, gift confessed and lived*. For God so loved the world that HE GAVE (gift given) His only Son, that whoever BELIEVES in Him (gift received) should not perish but have eternal LIFE (gift confessed and lived). Whether it is Abram, Paul, Nicodemus, or you and me, it is the same gift and life of our God, here for you. Given for you. And clinging to Him your faith is right, you need not

fear, and your salvation is assured. So go now, You who have been born from above, and live this new life!

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.