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“Back to the Basics”

Text: John 3:1-17 (Romans 4:1-8, 13-17; Genesis 12:1-9)

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

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and calls Him a *rabbi*, or teacher. High praise from a Pharisee who was himself *a teacher of Israel*. We know that Jesus is much more than that, but that night, that is what Nicodemus is going to learn. Nicodemus the teacher becomes Nicodemus the student. And since he calls Jesus teacher, Jesus begins teaching him. He doesn't even wait for Nicodemus to ask Him a question (did you notice that?) - Jesus just starts right in. Because good teachers know you have to start at the beginning. So Jesus does.

Because if you don't start at the beginning, if you don't have the fundamentals, you won't get the rest. So when you learn to read you don't start with *War and Peace* but with ABC. When you learn math you don't start with Calculus but with 1+1. You have to learn the fundamentals, and without them the rest will be wrong. So if you know Calculus and are doing a really advanced problem, but get some simple math wrong, it doesn't matter how much else you know, your answer will be wrong. Or if you're building a road or trying to draw a long straight line, if you're just a little off at the beginning, you're going to be a lot off at the end. You need to get the beginning right, the fundamentals right, the foundation right, or all the rest will be wrong.

So Jesus starts where good teachers start - at the beginning, with Nicodemus. ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again (or born from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*** Everything starts with birth, the new birth, and goes from there. *But Nicodemus doesn't get it.*

So then, like a good teacher, Jesus repeats His answer, but with a little more information, an explanation for Nicodemus' question, the second time. ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*** So this new birth is not a *physical* re-birth, but one that is done *by water and the Spirit*. The same **Spirit** that hovered over the face of the **waters** at the beginning of physical life in the creation (Genesis 1:1-2), is the same **Spirit** that works through **water** at the beginning of spiritual life in its creation. Or in other words, this is all the work of God. Life in all its forms is all the work of God. Not our work. So in the beginning: His Word + His water + His Spirit = life and creation. And still it is His Word + His water + His Spirit = *new* life and *new* creation.

But Nicodemus still doesn't get it. He's almost dumbfounded. This all sounds so strange to him! *How can these things be?* he asks Jesus. For you see, what started out as perhaps small errors in his theology had resulted in him being so far off and being on such a different page than Jesus that not only does He not understand what Jesus is talking about, but *he doesn't even recognize the Messiah sitting right before him!* The Messiah who was talked about all through the Scriptures he knew so well and was teaching to others. So he's asking questions that really don't even make sense. *Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb? Really, Nicodemus? That's the best you got?*

**It's all about the beginning.** Nicodemus is thinking about what man does or can do; Jesus is talking about what God does, and what God has *promised*. Nicodemus was thinking of how man can get to God; Jesus is talking about God coming to man. Nicodemus is thinking works; Jesus is talking grace, or gift.

And so Nicodemus is, understandably, confused. This is a whole different way of thinking. And it's why so many in our world today are confused. For still today, when it comes to religion and spirituality many first think it is about what we do, or *can* do, or *have* to do. It's about man's free will, or man's works, or man's decision. But if that's the starting point, and *even near* the starting point, then the end is going to be very far away from the truth.

Because that's not the beginning at all. *The beginning is God.* Whether it's things physical or things spiritual, the beginning is God. It's all about God descending to man. It's all about God's promises. And so in the beginning after Adam and Eve fell into sin and were afraid of God, God **came** to them and **called** them and made a **promise**, of a Saviour. And then this **coming** and **calling** and **promise** were repeated through the Old Testament. As we heard in the other readings, God **came** to a man named Abram (or Abraham) *who did not know Him* but worshiped false gods - and God **called** him and made a **promise** to him, of a land and of a Saviour. And then down through the generations, to Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Joshua and David and Solomon, God kept **coming** and **calling** and **promising**. Not that they do, but that they believe. There is doing, but the believing must come first.

And one of the best examples, Nicodemus - which surely you, a teacher of Israel, remember, Nicodemus - is the bronze serpent on a pole in the wilderness. What did the people do then, Nicodemus? All they were doing was getting bit by serpents. All they were doing was dying. But what happened, Nicodemus? God **came** to them and **called** them to faith and **promised** them healing and life. Wasn't that wonderful, Nicodemus?

Well that's what happening now, Nicodemus! Because *just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*, so now a man is going to be lifted up - *the Son of Man* - *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*. This is the fulfillment of all that **coming** and **calling** and **promising** of God. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only*

***Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.***” So that man who will be lifted up for the life of the world, Nicodemus, that Son of Man, *is the Son of God.* God **coming** and **calling** and **fulfilling** His promise. *Look to Him and not to yourself for your life.*

For that is the temptation we have and the problem we face: to look to ourselves and not to God for our life. That’s easy to do especially during Lent, when many people focus on spiritual disciplines this time of the year. But it’s not Lent’s fault or the discipline’s fault - **it’s sin’s fault.** Sin which has made us think that what WE do is the foundation, the beginning. Sin which has curved us in on ourselves and away from God. Sin which has separated us from God and so we try to make the best of it, trying to get life and find life by our own strength. *And satan is our biggest cheerleader and fan in that!* He doesn’t mind anyone having religion or spirituality, *as long as* you are trying to do it by yourself, with your own strength, and relying on what you can do. Because he knows that when you rely on yourself, you *are his.*

But we prayed earlier: *O God, You see* - He sees and knows. We may not always know and acknowledge it, but He knows - *You see that of ourselves we have no strength* (Collect of the Day). That right there is the beginning of true spirituality. The foundation. This repentance. Whatever you are going through in this life, you need help. You need forgiveness. You cannot do it. So *by Your might power,* we then pray, defend us, protect us, save us. *By Your mighty power, which is the cross.* Just as Israel looked to the snake on the pole in faith and lived, so look to the man on the cross in faith and live. And look to where that man on the cross has promised to be for us today - in the Word and the Sacraments.

Now many today, like Nicodemus then, will ask: ***How can that be? How can baptism and absolution and communion be that?*** Which will be your question if your faith has started on the wrong trajectory. They will make as little sense as Jesus’ words to Nicodemus.

But go back to the basics: it’s all God’s doing. God coming, God calling, God promising, God giving. Giving faith, giving forgiveness, giving new life. *From above.* That we be born again from above. And fed from above. And it’s not that we have to go up and go get these things that are above - God, as usual, as always, brings them down to us. All the way down into the most simplest things, so we who are simple can receive them - in water and words and bread and wine. Not very sophisticated, maybe. But even better than a snake on a pole.

***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.*** Just as God did not send the snakes in the wilderness to condemn His people but to save them, so Jesus did not come to condemn

but to save. For the world is already that - condemned. If God did *nothing*, that would be the result. Sin has cast us all out of the Father's kingdom.

But God didn't do nothing - He sent His Son. Jesus came to save and to give life. He came into the world and was lifted up on the tree of the cross for one purpose only - that we might live. To give life from above. To be that connection between God and man, between heaven and earth. That using the things of earth He give us the life of heaven. Yes, even the water and Spirit of Holy Baptism, the word of absolution, and the bread and wine that carries His Body and Blood. That looking to these in faith, and receiving them, we be blessed. We be children of Abraham. And more than that: children of God.

That's the ABCs and 1-2-3s of the faith. And even if you're a Christian well versed in the Scriptures and into the "calculus" of the faith, don't forget the basics. Or as Luther called it: the catechism. You can never know it well enough, Luther said. It is what God is always teaching us, ever new. Get it wrong and your calculus will be wrong. But get it right, and even if you never go on to Calculus, that's okay. Because eternal life is not a graduation, but a gift. To you. *From Him.*

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