

Rev. David R. Solum
2nd Sunday in Lent
March 7 & 8, 2020
Immanuel Lutheran, Michigan City
John 3:1-17

Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus because he could only think of a bodily birth and not a spiritual one. Nicodemus' mind had descended into the absurd: "Can a person go right back up into his mother's womb?" We can chuckle about this one, but we are not so different. How many times do we think of baptism as a kind of abstract spiritual birth with little bearing on our physical lives? Or how many times do we think that our physical life has little bearing on our spiritual life? We tend to compartmentalize things. Baptism and Church are for the spirit, my daily life is about the physical. And while there are necessary distinctions, such as their different needs (as I mentioned in last Wednesday's sermon about rest), they are also connected. You are not a disembodied spirit. Nor are you a spiritless body.

There are those who say they are "spiritual but not religious." But religion is just the visible, physical manifestation of the Spirit. It's the Spirit in action in our communal life and worship. If you think you have one without the other, you are mistaken or have the wrong spirit.

Nicodemus was extremely religious, but not spiritual, and thus didn't receive Jesus' testimony yet. But after witnessing Jesus being lifted up on the cross, he would understand better what this new birth entailed: a life made holy and offered up to God for the sake of one's neighbor.

When I was being interviewed by the Northwest District before entering seminary, I was asked, "When does eternal life begin?" "When we die," I answered. Their response was, "No. Eternal life is now. It has already begun for the baptized." They knew I wasn't wrong (per se) in my

answer. The glorified life without sin and death does begin after your earthly death. But, on the other hand, the new life of the Spirit, which is eternal, did begin at your baptism. Death, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, is only a shell of what it was. It doesn't kill the soul nor does it separate you from God. It doesn't even keep the body for long, from the perspective of eternity. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." That has already happened for you. You have been reborn. But in order to understand what this new life means for you, you have to understand what Jesus means by "the kingdom of God."

You could give a similar answer to the question, "When do you enter the kingdom of God?" Certainly, that glorious, visible kingdom doesn't come until after death. But you have already entered the kingdom itself. Baptism doesn't just give you some ticket to heaven that you can use to get in when you die. Baptism brings you into it. – Now, you can spurn the gifts and leave the kingdom behind and your baptism will do you no good. But for all who believe, baptism has brought you in and kept you in this kingdom. What is the kingdom of God? It is not so much a place, although at the resurrection there will certainly be a place in which we live forever. It is really the reign of God, God entering you, giving you His salvation and ruling with His gracious love over your hearts and minds and bodies by His Spirit.

Jesus' central message in His preaching as he travelled from town to town was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And what did He do to bring this kingdom? He forgave sins in conjunction with healing the sick and disabled, raising the dead, and casting out demons. As our Small Catechism says under the Lord's Prayer: "How does God's kingdom come? God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we

believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.” Notice there is no mention of a place, but the rule of God coming to us so that we are able to believe and obey the Gospel.

In order to give you this kingdom, another kingdom had to be destroyed. The kingdom of the devil, where sin and death are our masters, had to be conquered. The Small Catechism again says, “God’s will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature.” We were all born into the devil’s kingdom, because we were born with original sin, which denied us access to God’s kingdom. Everyone who is born of the flesh is flesh. This “flesh” is our sinful condition. Don’t mistake it to mean simply “body.” Nicodemus had no trouble understanding how physical birth worked, but he didn’t understand his sinful condition and the new birth Jesus was offering. Jesus is saying that everyone born of a sinner is a sinner. But those who are born of the Spirit in baptism, are *spiritual*.

How can this be? The Son of God became the Son of Man. Jesus had a human body and soul and mind and yet was fully God. And being God’s Son, He was born without sin, outside the kingdom of the devil, so that in His holy and obedient life, innocent death, and glorious resurrection, Jesus would bring humanity with Him into the kingdom of God. We are able to enter with Him because Christ’s sacrifice satisfied God’s wrath for our sins. In Christ, therefore, we are reconciled to the Creator, and if we are restored to the Creator, we become a new creation. God’s image and likeness are restored to us and we begin to reflect more and more Christ’s love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself.” Therefore, all who are baptized into Jesus Christ are taken from the devil’s kingdom and reborn into God’s. Instead of being an instrument of sin and death, our whole person becomes an instrument of life and salvation, and of God’s love to our neighbor.

Baptism is not, you see, just a spiritual thing that has nothing to do with our bodily life. It means that your bodies, in fact, are temples of the Holy Spirit. So, it matters what you do with them and how you behave. It also means that your everyday life and the good you do for your neighbor is a part of living in God’s kingdom. Therefore, you should remember your baptism and live in it and nurture this new life with God’s Word and Sacrament.

Perhaps I should use a concrete example that’s on everybody’s minds these days: the corona virus. Recently, a member here said that at some point I might have to stop shaking people’s hands after service. I jokingly “poo pooed” the idea at the time, but later, I thought, perhaps I need to think more seriously about this issue than I was. I mean, what would we do if our city was struck with a virus like Wuhan was in China? Should a Christian leave town? Would we isolate ourselves? Would we cancel services? Or would we skip certain parts of the Divine Service? Would we shake hands? These are legitimate questions. There is an excellent work by Martin Luther on this very subject called, “Whether one may flee from a deadly plague.” It is refreshingly comforting and surprisingly relevant to today. Despite our advances in medicine since the 16th century, Luther had a lot of common-sense advice that would easily apply today. And he had a wonderful section of comfort for believers who are suffering with the plague. I highly recommend it.

Anyway, I do believe if we remember our baptism, we will have more direction in these things. Remember that you are a new creation, and that new creation is made to serve your neighbor. That means that God has called you into a variety of offices which you are obligated to help, even when your life is in danger. For example, doctors and nurses help the sick, although there is the risk of contracting it themselves. Just as fire fighters are not free to decide to run away from fire, we are to serve where we are called: parents to their children, children to their elderly parents, elected officials to their constituents, pastors to their congregations, doctors to their patients, and so forth.

When the bubonic plague arrived in Wittenberg, the prince urged Luther to flee. Two hundred years prior the same sickness had killed $\frac{1}{4}$ of Europe's population. Luther decided to remain there, preach, tend to the sick, and give last rites to the dying. Luther quoted Christ, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees." And He also remembered the words, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." It is far better to die serving God than to die running away from Him. And we can be assured that since we are God's children in baptism, if God wants us preserved from sickness, He will preserve us. And when our time has come, God will take us. No matter what happens to us, we are Christ's.

On the other hand, because our baptism means that our bodies are holy and precious to God, we should not unnecessarily bring harm to ourselves or others. We are not to put God to the test, like when Satan tempted Christ to throw Himself off a building. If we don't need to come near

the sick, we protect ourselves. And if we are sick, we keep ourselves secluded and receive treatment from doctors, who are God's servants to us. After all, we are still commanded to take care of our lives and we are to love our neighbor and not cause harm to them. Just recently a classmate and friend of mine, who is pastor of my home church when I was in Seattle, was exposed to the corona virus. So far – thank God – he hasn't gotten sick, but he's in isolation. Since there are other pastors who can easily fill in for him and he has elders to help with his duties, he need not risk exposing others.

The Divine Service is still celebrated in Seattle. After all, why would we, for fear of death, keep away from Christ's life-giving body and blood? Should we really be afraid of the common cup, which holds the very blood of the One who conquered death? We should be more afraid to be without it! (Also, as a side note, some studies have been done by scientists to see whether there is a health risk in taking the common cup. They have found no added risk, because the silver or gold of the cup and the alcohol in the wine are not friendly to viruses. But I don't use this as a main reason to not be afraid of communing.) That being said, there are things that are not commanded by Christ, which we might do well to avoid in the event of a real epidemic in our city. -Things like shaking hands or potlucks and things of that nature. And it would be a good precaution for those exposed to the virus to stay home until they know they aren't infected. We make the best decision we can to love our neighbor and care for the body with the peace of mind that it is not our works that save us, but the grace of Jesus Christ alone.

This takes away our fear of the virus. If in our baptism we have already passed through death and are reborn, what can the devil do with this sickness? He wishes us to be fearful and to take

away our trust that we are God's children. He wants us insecure and to love this life more than the kingdom of God, and make us paralyzed from serving our neighbor. But we live in God's kingdom, which the gates of hell cannot overwhelm. Within God's kingdom we have all the promises of Scripture, such as: "Blessed is he who considers the poor. The Lord will deliver him in the day of trouble....The Lord will sustain him on his sickbed. In his illnesses He will heal all his infirmities." Thus, the devil can sicken, but Christ will heal; the devil can kill the body, but Christ will raise it up again. We who look to the cross are born again. Just as Moses lifted up the snake on a pole so that those with snake bites could look at it and be healed by God, we who suffer the sicknesses of this fallen world look to the Son of Man who was lifted up by God on the cross for our infirmities. Whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. Amen.