

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Holy Trinity Sunday

May 27, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Another shot at life

—John 3:1-17

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives life to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the only-begotten, who came from the Father full of grace and truth (John 1:1-14).

God is light. In him there is no darkness at all. God is life. He is the source and origin of everything that exists, the fount of all life. God is love. God created human beings to bask in his light, to know life with him, and to live in his love. Sadly, our first human parents chose a different path. They turned away from God's light through their disobedience, and they plunged themselves and their posterity into darkness. They ran from God's love, and they hid. They cut themselves off from the source of life, and they died; they died, and they brought death into creation and upon the entire human race. So you will die. So will I. It's only a matter of time. We are all ticking time bombs. Whether it's a school shooter or a car accident, a heart attack or a stroke, cancer or pneumonia, or just plain old age, we will all die. You were born to die, as were your parents before you and your children after you. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Death is the baseline. Death is the default setting. It has to be this way. If it were not for death, man in his arrogance would live with complete impunity, thumbing his nose at all morality and mocking God. But man must die and stand before God. And there's nothing man can do to stop it. Death is the ultimate slap in man's arrogant face, the ultimate reminder that in spite of all our wealth, power and technology we are helpless, the ultimate reminder that we are dust and ashes. We need another shot at life.

Nicodemus was an important man. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. There had been a lot of talk about Jesus among the Sanhedrin. The rabbi from Nazareth had generated a lot of discussion and a lot of confusion. The Jewish leaders didn't quite know what to make of this man from Galilee. Jesus was a nonconformist; he broke the rules. He healed on the Sabbath. He forgave people their sins—only God could do that! He lectured the Pharisees—the most upright people in Jewish society—for their lovelessness and legalism and hypocrisy. But Jesus had power; everyone could see that Jesus had power. He couldn't perform the miraculous signs he did if God weren't with him, but why would God put his stamp of approval on an in-your-face, anti-establishment populist from the backwoods Galilean town of Nazareth? So Nicodemus came at night. It was not politically correct to be seen with Jesus. It could be bad for his career. Some among the religious elite had already decided that Jesus was bad for the people. They would put out of synagogue anyone who was associated with Jesus.

Still Nicodemus came. He came to Jesus because he had questions, and he needed answers. He was missing something. He might have been at the pinnacle of his career, successful, admired in the eyes of his peers, prestigious in society, but there was something missing. He was walking in the law, but he had not kept it. He was doing his best to please God, but it wasn't good enough. He knew the Scriptures, but he could see that they were pointing to something he hadn't found yet. He was a spiritual man, but he wanted more. So he came to Jesus. There was a hole in his life that all his influence, all his religious dedication, was not filling. So he came to Jesus. He needed another shot at life.

That's exactly what Jesus offered him: another shot at life. "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." What an offer! A new birth, a new life, another chance to reconnect with God. It's not another birth from a mother's womb, but a new birth by the Spirit of God. "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." Born again of water and the Spirit—what's he talking about? Let's let the Bible itself tell us what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about Baptism. How do we know? Because Titus chapter 3 calls Baptism "the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

John the Baptist came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John pointed people to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So what do we need to do to be born again? Listen closely to that question: What do we need to do to be born again? The answer is: We don't do anything to be born again. Being "born again" is a beautiful picture of what God does for us! God works repentance in us. God sends his Spirit into our hearts. God washes us with water and places his name on us. God gives us rebirth. God gives us new life. We had nothing to do with being born the first time. All we did was make life difficult for mother. We contributed absolutely nothing. We did not help or choose. So it is with being born again. The Spirit gave birth to us. Filled this spiritually dead flesh and bones with the breath of life.

I do not remember being born. Google Calendar tells me it was a Sunday, November 15, 1964. My mother tells me that it was a long labor and that finally they used a forceps to get me out. I don't remember. But I know it happened, because, well, here I am! Here I am 53 years later, a living, breathing, walking, talking human being. I do not remember being born again. It was also a Sunday, December 6, 1964. I was cradled in the arms of my godparents at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Pomona, California, and my grandfather washed me with water and spoke the name of the Holy Trinity over me, as I was baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I don't know how it felt. I can imagine, but I don't remember the experience. I have pictures and a baptism certificate to help me celebrate that very special occasion when the Spirit of God breathed new life into my spiritually dead soul. How do I know it happened? Well, here I am 53 years later. Satan has not succeeded in putting me to death again—though he has tried—and I am still to this day a living, breathing, believing, born-again Christian. I was given another shot at life. I am a member of God's family, a child of my heavenly Father, and an heir of eternal life.

So are you. Flesh gives birth to flesh. But you have been born again by the Spirit of God. You were once an inanimate spiritual corpse, but you have been given another shot at life through the Spirit, who breathed life into you through his Word. That's grace! You and I are the passive recipients of God's grace. Our Triune God has done it all to bring us into his family. Our place in God's family is a gift of his grace!

But if my Baptism was long ago, and I don't even remember the occasion, what blessing can I gain from it today? Ah, my friends, each day of grace is another shot at life. Yesterday is gone. Yesterday's sins are forgiven. Yesterday's burdens, cares, and guilt are removed, and each day we start fresh in a new day of forgiveness and new life. Each day we relive our baptism as each day we drown the old sinful nature through daily repentance, and each day we are renewed and reborn by the Holy Spirit. Each day we remember the gospel of our forgiveness and salvation: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

You and I were born the first time under a death sentence; Jesus was not. But God so loved you that for you and for a world of sinners, God placed his Son under our death sentence. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, God lifted up Jesus on the cross in our place as our substitute, and Jesus died covered in our sins. Jesus was cast into outer darkness, abandoned by God's love, so that the debt of sin could be paid, our sin could be removed, and our forgiveness would be complete. Your sin has been forgiven! The resurrection of Jesus from the dead proves it! God has given the world in Christ another shot at life.

This weekend is Memorial Day. For many this weekend means hot dogs and burgers on the grill, beer on sale at the grocery store, and the official start of summer. But as we all know, this weekend is really about reflecting upon and remembering the sacrifice that brave men and women made in service to their country, so that you and I can enjoy the freedom we have today. We owe our fallen soldiers an enormous debt of gratitude. But even those sacrifices of the many pale in comparison to the one sacrifice that Jesus made. He was lifted upon a cross for the sin of the world. He spilled his blood to wash away our sins. He rescued us from the eternal tyranny of the devil. He has given you his Spirit. You've been born again. You believe in him, and by that faith in him as your Savior you have the right to be called children of God. You've been given a new life. Spend your new life in gratitude to Jesus. You're no longer controlled by your sinful flesh; you live by the Spirit. You're no longer a slave to sin; you belong to Christ. Honor and serve him every day, until he makes everything new, and you give him your highest and most perfect thanks and praise him in heaven. Amen.