

"AN UPLIFTING MEETING"
JOHN 3:1-17
S. OF THE HOLY TRINITY
MESSIAH, BOERNE
MAY 26, 2024

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.
AMEN.

TEXT: JOHN 3:1-17

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:

SOMETIMES PEOPLE ARE ASKED, "IF YOU COULD MEET ANY PERSON
IN HISTORY, WHO WOULD THAT PERSON BE?" ANSWERS VARY WIDELY, OF
COURSE, BUT THE ANSWER TO THAT TELLS US SOMETHING ABOUT THE
PERSON BEING QUESTIONED, LIKE WHAT THEY THINK IS IMPORTANT IN
LIFE. SO, FOR EXAMPLE, IF YOU COULD MEET WITH ANY PERSON IN
HISTORY, THE PERSON YOU WOULD MOST LIKELY CHOOSE WOULD BE
SOMEONE INVOLVED IN A VERY IMPORTANT ASPECT OF YOUR LIFE,
PERHAPS EVEN VITALLY IMPORTANT.

SUCH IS THE CASE WITH THE MEETING BETWEEN NICODEMUS AND
JESUS IN OUR GOSPEL TEXT THIS MORNING. NICODEMUS KNOWS THAT
JESUS IS AN IMPORTANT PERSON AND THAT HE HAS AN IMPORTANT LESSON
FROM GOD TO TEACH. HE COMES TO JESUS IN ORDER TO LEARN ABOUT
GOD FROM HIM, BUT HE'S UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND IT BY HUMAN REASON
ALONE. AS JESUS SAYS, HE NEEDS TO BE "BORN AGAIN" (V 3), THAT
IS, BORN FROM GOD ABOVE BY WATER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT (V 5).
ONLY THEN WILL HE HAVE AN UPLIFTING MEETING.

OUR TEXT BEGINS WITH THE AWKWARD ENCOUNTER BETWEEN NICODEMUS AND JESUS. OUR TEXT REVEALS RIGHT FROM THE BEGINNING THAT NICODEMUS ISN'T "BORN AGAIN" BECAUSE HE GOES TO MEET WITH JESUS AT NIGHT. SINCE THE INVENTION OF ARTIFICIAL LIGHT, PEOPLE CAN MEET AT ALL HOURS—DAY OR NIGHT! BUT IN JESUS' DAY, WHEN THE MOST COMMON FORM OF LIGHT WAS THE SMALL FLAME OF A LAMP BURNING OLIVE OIL, A MEETING AT NIGHT WAS UNUSUAL. NICODEMUS CAME TO SEE JESUS "BY NIGHT" BECAUSE IT WAS LESS LIKELY FOR HIM TO BE SEEN BY SOMEONE HE KNEW, IN PARTICULAR BY ONE OF HIS FELLOW PHARISEES (V 2a). HE WAS AFRAID THAT, IF HIS FELLOW PHARISEES LEARNED THAT HE HAD MET WITH JESUS, HE MIGHT LOSE HIS POSITION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN THE SANHEDRIN AS "A RULER OF THE JEWS" (V 1). THUS, RATHER THAN BEING FILLED WITH THE BOLDNESS OF FAITH THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVES, NICODEMUS WAS FILLED WITH FEAR (2 TIM 1:7).

JESUS RECOGNIZES NICODEMUS' SPIRITUAL NEED, AND OVERLOOKING HIS COMPLEMENTARY WORDS (V 2b), HE GOES STRAIGHT TO THE ISSUE: "TRULY, TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, UNLESS ONE IS BORN AGAIN, HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD" (V 3). YOU SEE, NICODEMUS CAME TO JESUS ON THE BASIS OF WHAT HIS REASON COMPREHENDED—THAT JESUS WAS A TEACHER FROM GOD—A PROPHET—AS DEMONSTRATED BY THE MIRACLES, THE MIRACULOUS "SIGNS," HE DID (V 2; DEUT 18:21-22). BUT JESUS DIDN'T WANT NICODEMUS TO COME TO HIM SIMPLY FOR AN EARTHLY MEETING. HE WANTED NOCDEMUS—EVEN AS HE WANTS YOU AND ME AND ALL

PEOPLE—TO SPEND ETERNITY WITH HIM IN HEAVEN. SO, WHEN NICODEMUS CONTINUES TO DEMONSTRATE HIS EARTHLY REASONING BY ASKING IF A MAN HAD TO UNDERGO PHYSICAL BIRTH AGAIN (V 4), JESUS GETS MORE SPECIFIC: "TRULY, TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, UNLESS ONE IS BORN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT, HE CANNOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD" (V 5).

OF COURSE, NICODEMUS IS NOT THE ONLY PERSON IN NEED OF SPIRITUAL REBIRTH. APPROXIMATELY TWO-THIRDS OF THE PEOPLE LIVING ON EARTH TODAY HAVE NEVER HEARD OF JESUS CHRIST, AND ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES, ALL PEOPLE BORN SINCE THE FALL OF ADAM AND EVE, EXCEPT FOR JESUS, ARE BORN WITH INHERITED SIN AND ARE INCLINED TOWARD EVIL (GEN 6:5). THEY ARE SPIRITUALLY DEAD AND BLIND (1 COR 2:1; JN 9:40-41). THEY NEED A NEW HEART AND NEW SIGHT (EZ 36:26; JN 9:39), GIFTS GRANTED ONLY BY THE HOLY SPIRIT WORKING THROUGH GOD'S MEANS OF GRACE, HIS WORD AND THE SACRAMENTS OF HOLY BAPTISM AND HOLY COMMUNION. GOD PROMISES THAT EVERYONE WHO IS BORN AGAIN, WHO RECEIVES THE WASHING OF REGENERATION AND RENEWAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN HOLY BAPTISM (TITUS 3:5), IS FORGIVEN ALL OF HIS OR HER SINS AND RECEIVES THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SAVING FAITH IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST (ACTS 2:38). AS JESUS SAYS IN OUR TEXT, THEY ARE "BORN OF THE SPIRIT" (V 8).

NOW, YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED THAT SOMETIMES I TALK ABOUT BEING "BORN AGAIN" AND AT OTHER TIMES ABOUT BEING "BORN FROM ABOVE." THE REASON I DO THIS IS THAT THE GREEK WORD USED BY JOHN IN OUR

TEXT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AND TRANSLATED IN BOTH WAYS. SO, WHILE THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION BIBLE TRANSLATES IT "BORN AGAIN," THE GOOD NEWS BIBLE TRANSLATED BY MISSIONARIES OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD SAYS "BORN FROM ABOVE," WITH FOOTNOTES REFERING TO THE OTHER TRANSLATION. JOHN OFTEN USES WORDS WITH MORE THAN ONE MEANING IN HIS GOSPEL SO THAT THE READER PERCEIVES HOW PROFOUND JESUS' TEACHING REALLY IS. IN THIS CASE, JESUS WANTS THE READER TO PERCEIVE THAT *TRUE* UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S WORD, SPECIFICALLY THE GOOD NEWS OF SALVATION IN JESUS CHRIST, IS NOT A MATTER OF EARTHLY REASON ALONE BUT MUST COME "FROM ABOVE," FROM GOD.

NICODEMUS WAS A LEARNED MAN AND A MEMBER OF THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS PARTY OF THE PHARISEES. STILL, ALTHOUGH HE WAS A "TEACHER OF ISRAEL" (V 10), HE DID NOT UNDERSTAND JESUS' TEACHING CONCERNING THE NECESSITY OF BEING BORN AGAIN (V 10). THIS IS BECAUSE SUCH KNOWLEDGE DOESN'T ORIGINATE IN HUMAN BEINGS OR COME NATURALLY BY HUMAN BIRTH, BUT IT ONLY COMES FROM THE ONE WHO HAS "DESCENDED FROM HEAVEN, THE SON OF MAN" (V 13). AS JOHN WRITES IN HIS PROLOGUE, REFERING TO JESUS: "NO ONE HAS EVER SEEN GOD; THE ONLY GOD, WHO IS AT THE FATHER'S SIDE, HE HAS MADE HIM KNOWN" TO US (1:18). THUS, SUCH UNDERSTANDING ONLY COMES ABOUT BY BEING "BORN FROM ABOVE," FROM GOD IN HEAVEN. THAT'S WHAT JESUS MEANS WHEN HE SAYS, "THAT WHICH IS BORN OF THE FLESH IS FLESH, AND THAT WHICH IS BORN OF THE SPIRIT IS SPIRIT" (V 6).

BY MEANS OF GOD'S SPIRITUAL REBIRTH FROM ABOVE, YOU AND I ARE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND GOD'S WORD AND BELIEVE IT. ONCE WE ARE BORN FROM ABOVE BY THE GOSPEL AND IN HOLY BAPTISM, THE BIBLE IS NO LONGER A HIDDEN BOOK. THE GOOD NEWS OF SALVATION IN JESUS CHRIST IS UNDERSTANDABLE BY REASON AND APPREHENDED BY FAITH, SO THAT WE BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD AND HEIRS OF ETERNAL LIFE. AS SPIRITUAL PEOPLE, WE ARE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE SPIRIT'S TEACHINGS, AS ST. PAUL WRITES,

NO ONE COMPREHENDS THE THOUGHTS OF GOD EXCEPT THE SPIRIT OF GOD. NOW WE HAVE RECEIVED NOT THE SPIRIT OF THE WORLD, BUT THE SPIRIT WHO IS FROM GOD, THAT WE MIGHT UNDERSTAND THE THINGS FREELY GIVEN TO US. (1 COR 2:11b-12)

THE GREATEST OF THE THINGS FREELY GIVEN TO US BY GOD IS OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST AND THE SALVATION HE WON FOR US BY HIS BLOODY DEATH ON THE CROSS, WHICH FLOWS TO US FREELY BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IN HIM. AS JESUS SAYS IN OUR TEXT, IT'S LIKE THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WHO WANDERED IN THE WILDERNESS AFTER THEIR EXODUS FROM EGYPT AND WERE PUNISHED FOR THEIR REBELLION AGAINST GOD AND MOSES WITH POISONOUS SNAKES. WHEN THEY COMPLAINED ABOUT THE LACK OF FOOD AND WATER, "THE LORD SENT FIERY SERPENTS AMONG THE PEOPLE, AND THEY BIT THE PEOPLE, SO THAT MANY PEOPLE OF ISRAEL DIED" (NUM 21:6). BUT WHEN THE PEOPLE CONFESSED THEIR SINS TO MOSES, HE SET UP A BRONZE SERPENT HIGH ON A POLE ACCORDING TO GOD'S COMMAND WITH THE PROMISE THAT EVERYONE WHO SAW IT WOULD LIVE. SOME PEOPLE BELIEVED GOD'S PROMISE CONCERNING THE BRONZE

SNAKE, "AND IF A SERPENT BIT ANYONE, HE WOULD LOOK AT THE BRONZE SERPENT AND LIVE" (NUM 21:9).

SO IT IS WITH JESUS. LIKE THE JEWS WHO REBELLED AGAINST GOD AND MOSES, WE ALSO HAVE REBELLED AGAINST THE LORD AND BEEN BIT BY THE ANCIENT SERPENT, THE DEVIL, AND POISONED BY SIN. NOW WE MUST DIE, FOR "THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH" (ROM 6:23a), FOR WE PRESENTLY LIVE UNDER THE POWER OF SIN AND THE CURSE OF THE LAW. WE CANNOT FREE OURSELVES FROM THE POWER OF SIN AND DEATH BUT MUST REMAIN IN OUR LOST CONDITION UNTIL SOMEONE SETS UP ANOTHER "SERPENT," WHO WILL DO US NO HARM BUT RATHER BENEFIT. THIS IS JESUS CHRIST, WHOM GOD "LIFTED UP, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM MAY HAVE ETERNAL LIFE" (3:14-15).

FOR GOD 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. (JOHN 3:16-17)

SUCH A SIMPLE PROMISE TO BELIEVE, AND IF A PERSON BELIEVES THAT THE DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST HAS TAKEN AWAY HIS OR HER SINS, HE OR SHE IS BORN AGAIN! BUT THE SINFUL HUMAN NATURE CANNOT BELIEVE THAT GOD WILL GRACIOUSLY TAKE AWAY AND FORGIVE ALL OUR SINS. REASON ARGUES THAT, BECAUSE YOU HAVE SINNED, YOU MUST MAKE UP FOR YOUR SINS BY DOING GOOD WORKS. BUT THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IS THIS: IF YOU HAVE FALLEN INTO SIN, ANOTHER MUST DIE AND PAY FOR YOUR SIN, AND IF YOU BELIEVE THIS, YOU BECOME ONE WITH JESUS CHRIST AND HAVE EVERYTHING THAT IS CHRIST'S.

JOHN TELLS US THAT ISAIAH SAW JESUS' GLORY, SPOKE OF HIM,
BELIEVED IN HIM, AND REJOICED (JN 12:41)!

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST, NICODEMUS' MEETING WITH JESUS BEGAN
IN AN AWKWARD WAY BECAUSE NICODEMUS WASN'T "BORN AGAIN," THAT
IS, BORN FROM ABOVE BY GOD'S SPIRIT. FROM THE SCRIPTURES, WE
KNOW IT WASN'T ALWAYS THAT WAY, HOWEVER, FOR AFTER OUR LORD WAS
LIFTED UP ON CALVARY'S CROSS IN ORDER TO SUFFER AND DIE AS THE
RANSOM PRICE FOR THE SINS OF ALL PEOPLE, NICODEMUS JOINED JOSEPH
OF ARIMATHEA IN PREPARING OUR LORD'S BODY FOR BURIAL AND BURYING
HIM IN THE NEW GARDEN TOMB "IN WHICH NO ONE HAD YET BEEN LAID"
(20:41). NICODEMUS WAS BORN AGAIN, BORN FROM ABOVE BY THE HOLY
SPIRIT, AND HE WAS FILLED WITH THE BOLDNESS OF FAITH TO LIVE FOR
JESUS, WHATEVER THE CONSEQUENCES. GOD GRANT US ALL SUCH AN
UPLIFTING MEETING WITH JESUS, HERE IN TIME AND THERE IN
ETERNITY. AMEN.