

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
[www.lutheranlccf.org](http://www.lutheranlccf.org)  
**Fourth Sunday After Epiphany, February 2, 2025**

† † †

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 369, 237:1, 37, 411, 51.

Lessons: Numbers 21: 1-9, First Corinthians 9: 16-23, Mark 1: 29-39.

Text: John 3: 1-18.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our sermon text shows us the context of what is probably the most well-known Bible Passage. After learning the Bible passage *“God is love”* (1 John 4:16), most children probably learn John 3:16: *“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.”*

Please listen as

**JESUS TEACHES NICODEMUS ABOUT THE NEW BIRTH**

- 1. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night.**
- 2. Jesus speaks about being born again, but Nicodemus does not understand.**
- 3. Jesus speaks of God’s unsurpassed love.**

This historical event occurred early in Jesus’ ministry. Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews, a Pharisee, a learned man. Pharisees had a well-deserved bad reputation for opposing John the Baptist and later, for opposing Jesus Christ himself. But this man, for some reason, wanted to learn more about Jesus. However, he came at night, perhaps because he feared the reactions of other Pharisees who saw Jesus as a threat to them. But he came to learn more about Jesus, and to learn it from the source – Jesus himself, rather than learning from what others said. We too, can take a lesson from that: we are to search the Scriptures and learn from Jesus himself.

He came because Jesus’ miracles had impressed him. He recognized and said that Jesus was *“a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”* If he knew the Scriptures we call the Old Testament, he would have realized that a Messiah would come who would rescue people from their sins. But there is no proof he came because he believed Jesus was that Messiah.

He approaches Jesus by admitting that Jesus is a teacher come from God and that has to be the reason that Jesus is performing miracles. But he really didn’t know what to make of Jesus so he came to find out the truth. Jesus gives him what may seem to be a strange answer: *“In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’”*

Jesus tells Nicodemus what he needs to hear. But Nicodemus didn’t understand. Jesus explains that this is not some kind of a physical birth, but a rebirth, a being born again by the power of God. *“Jesus answered, ‘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.’”* This new birth Jesus is speaking of is Baptism, by which the Holy Spirit works saving faith.

Humans need this heavenly rebirth to enter God’s kingdom, or even to see it. God’s kingdom is his rule of grace in our hearts. Through Baptism the Holy Spirit connects us with God’s ruling love. He works a new

birth, a birth that makes a person a child of God and a member of God's kingdom. This is exactly what St. Paul wrote to Titus in Titus 3:5 when he tells us that God ***“saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”***

There are two births – one is physical, one is spiritual. One is flesh born of flesh, the other is spirit – the new man within the believer – born of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Every single human being enters this world outside of God's kingdom, a sinful human being. Contrary to what some teach, infants begin their lives under the condemnation of sin. Scripture makes that clear, and I have heard mothers tell of the evidences of sin such as sinful temper tantrums in babies only a few days old. Scripture says ***“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”*** Psalm 51:5, New International Version. ***“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”*** Psalm 51:5, King James Version. The New Testament repeats that in this way in Romans 7:18: ***“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”***

Jesus was talking about the kind of thing that even Ezekiel wrote about when he speaks these words of God: ***“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”*** Ezekiel 36:25-27.

Nicodemus didn't understand. But Jesus then uses an earthly illustration. ***“You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*** Even in this age of greater understanding of weather, Jesus' words apply. For example, we don't really know where a wind, such as a northwest wind, started or where it will end up and stop blowing. We can't be certain when or from what direction the wind will come. In a similar way everyone born of the Holy Spirit cannot fully understand how God in his Wisdom sends that Spirit. They just know he does.

Jesus made one slight change in his use of the word “you” in this verse. When Jesus says ***“You must be born again”***, he used the Greek plural “You”. So clearly, he is not just talking about Nicodemus alone, but talking about all people, you too.

But still Nicodemus can't understand. ***“‘You are Israel's teacher,’ said Jesus, ‘and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?’”*** Jesus again stresses that he is telling the truth: He says ***“we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.”*** When he says “we”, he could be referring to himself and John the Baptist. He could also have been referring to himself, and the Father, and the Holy Spirit, the triune God. But the result is the same. John the Baptist was speaking what God told him to say. Jesus was speaking as the very Son of God, and we know from Scripture that God does not and would not contradict himself.

Jesus had just spoken to Nicodemus of the spiritual activity that takes place in this world. The new birth happens in a person's heart here on earth. Repentance, Baptism, and faith happen on earth. But Nicodemus still did not understand, or more importantly, did not believe. Jesus says just that: ***“I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?”*** How then could he possibly believe if Jesus were to tell him of spiritual activity that takes place in heaven, ***“heavenly things”***? But Jesus in this way prepared Nicodemus to hear and believe the even more wondrous ***“heavenly things”***.

Jesus had the knowledge and authority to tell Nicodemus of heavenly things because he alone came from heaven. Jesus was the Word, the true Son of God, who was with God when the plan of salvation was determined. And he had become a perfect human being, the Son of Man as well as the Son of God to perform and execute that plan.

Then came the teachings from heaven. Jesus pointed him to the Scriptures for understanding. He drew a parallel between the act of Moses lifting up the brass snake in the desert and Jesus being lifted up on the cross. Nicodemus would surely know this incident from Israel's history, as we read in our Old Testament lesson this morning. After the people sinned we read ***"Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."*** Numbers 21:4-9.

The snake was lifted up on a pole. Jesus was to be lifted up on a cross. Everyone who looked in faith at the snake was healed from the deadly snake bites. Everyone who would look in faith at Jesus would be saved from the bite of eternal death and have eternal life. This is the life that begins with the new birth by the Spirit.

This promise belongs to ***"everyone"*** who believes. In that way it is universal. No one who believes is excluded. At the same time the promise belongs to each one who believes. In that way it is personal. God knows the names and the intimate lives of everyone who believes.

Jesus then gives Nicodemus the tremendous truth that we can so easily take for granted: ***"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."*** Or, as I and many of you memorized it from the King James Version of the Bible, together with the next verse: ***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."*** God loved the world he had created, even though man, the crown of that creation had gone bad and ruined it all. Our sins did not stop God from loving us. Such love we do not understand. But we – and all mankind – need to know about it, because it is the only way to live eternally.

God's love brought results. He offered the ultimate sacrifice for the world he loved. He gave his one and only Son. And everyone who believes that fact, everyone who has faith in that Son of God as Savior shall not perish but have everlasting life.

Although we see believers die, that's just a physical death that ends our time on earth. Believers live on forever with Jesus. We enjoy life with Jesus now already, but after death we will know life in full glory – eternal life.

God the Father loved the undeserving world so much that he sent his Son to save it. God the Son, present here in the person of Jesus, came to fulfill the Father's will and win eternal life for all people. God the Spirit comes to work the faith people need to receive the gift of eternal life. He brings about a new birth. Believe and live. God doesn't lie. Amen.

Revised from a Ministry By Mail sermon for February 13, 2011.