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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
May 30, 2021
Trinity Sunday

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:14-17
Hymns: 246; 243; 245; 377:10

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: John 3:1-17

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

³Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

⁴Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

⁵Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? ¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses

lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, true God with the Father and the Holy Spirit, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Does it really matter which god you worship?

Isn't what's most important is that you believe in god, and that you are sincere in that belief, so that you are nice to people and striving to make this world a better place? Many people around us in America, even among those who describe themselves as Christians, would subscribe to such a religious philosophy. The fact is the gods of this world are idols.

"But our God is in heaven;

He does whatever He pleases.

⁴*Their idols are silver and gold,*

The work of men's hands.

⁵*They have mouths, but they do not speak;*

Eyes they have, but they do not see;

⁶*They have ears, but they do not hear;*

Noses they have, but they do not smell;

⁷*They have hands, but they do not handle;*

Feet they have, but they do not walk;

Nor do they mutter through their throat.

⁸*Those who make them are like them;*

So is everyone who trusts in them." (Psalm 115:3-8)

On this Trinity Sunday the focus of our meditation is on --

THEME: Knowing the Triune God, the God of Our Salvation!

The first item of importance is the realization that the true God is --
I. Known Only by the Working of the Holy Spirit.

In our text we have the record of a private conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus, a Pharisee who was a member of the Jewish council of the Sanhedrin. This means that he would certainly have been a religious man who should have been well versed in Scripture. He came to Jesus by night desiring to learn more about Jesus and the truth about God, the God Nicodemus was supposed to have properly known, but didn't.

Jesus began the lesson to Nicodemus by teaching Nicodemus how people come to know and believe in the only true God, and how people, sinners that we are, can enter into the kingdom of God. Jesus opened with the concept of being born again. This was a strange new idea for Nicodemus, and so he followed with a question that sought insight into what Jesus was saying. When Nicodemus asks, *"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"* (v.4) his question was not worded in a way that suggests ridicule. Jesus was talking about something Nicodemus didn't understand.

"Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.'" (v.5-8)

Jesus introduces Nicodemus (and so also us) to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus reveals that the Spirit brings us to the knowledge of the truth. Jesus makes it very clear that people will not, indeed cannot, come to God on their own. The corruption of sin is quite thorough. *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh."* (v.6) By nature we are born sinful even as our parents were before us. We were estranged from God. We could not know Him. We could not come to Him. We didn't have a clue how to establish a peaceful relationship with God. We couldn't even know who He

is, much less possess the Lord in our hearts with the confidence of faith. We were all dead in our trespasses and sins. (Ephesians 2:1)

The idea that a man like Nicodemus had been holding to was that if one lived a stellar life of upholding the law righteousness would abound from within and please God, much to the praise and glory of that man! He didn't have a clue that all he could possibly accumulate was more sin, more guilt, more condemnation.

This is the natural religion of man. This is what comes from within, and it has an appeal to us also. We don't want to hear that just being nice doesn't cut it! It doesn't secure righteousness. Of course we want people everywhere to be nice. We ought to be nice, and kind, but that doesn't make us righteous, or bring us to God. Only God the Holy Spirit can do that, and it is by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit that we are born again, given a spiritual rebirth so that we have our sins washed away, and we are blessed with *"the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness."* (Ephesians 4 24)

The Holy Spirit doesn't work in a vacuum. Jesus compares the coming of the Holy Spirit into one's heart with the wind which comes, yet we cannot perceive its workings or source. Jesus taught Nicodemus that the Spirit works through means. Jesus spoke of being born again of water and the Holy Spirit. Jesus opens to us the truth of the power of the Gospel in the washing of Holy Baptism. Jesus making this point at this time in His lesson with Nicodemus emphasizes the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit. The appeal of the world may tempt one like Nicodemus, even in our day, to think coming to faith is of our own spiritual volition and will. The washing of water, that wonder of grace most of us received in infancy, gives all glory to the Holy Spirit. We are brought to a wondrous knowledge of faith in the one true God by the Spirit's power working through the Gospel.

Nicodemus was even more amazed, and Jesus taught that the true God is --

II. Known Only by Revelation from God Himself.

In the world the philosophy of meditation taught in eastern mysticism, and embraced by many Americans in many meditation

and even yoga classes, is the idea that by quiet contemplation one will be able to come into contact with the inner divine, and we will know God even as we seek that tranquility that only such focus upon the inner divine can bring.

Yoga for increasing one's physical agility may be constructive, but many a yoga teacher will ultimately go to the next step of promising inner tranquility which can only be found in the quiet contemplation on a mantra, which is often the name of a pagan deity, while reaching out for a spark of the divine. Many people go for that stuff. Rich or poor, highly educated and powerful and wealthy people, all find what they seek, that final boost of the ego to the divine. It is the lie of Satan, "*Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God!*" (Genesis 3:5)

The true God is known not by the observation of nature, or by the inner meditation of the heart, or by science. God is known to us by the revelation of God to mankind. Jesus shares with us the counsel of God. "*Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.*" (v. 11-13) This is wisdom concerning the only true God and the salvation that we have in His name. This truth comes to us from God in heaven above, not from the mind of man. Jesus emphasized this with the assertion that He alone has come down from heaven, AND as the Son of God He is in heaven.

Mystery upon mystery, for the truth of the Triune God is far past human understanding. It is the truth that saves. It is the truth that lives in the heart of the child of God as this knowledge is brought to us by God who has called us to be His children by the working of the Holy Spirit.

This God has made Himself --

III. Known Only through Faith in Jesus.

We are all familiar with the closing verses of our text. It includes one of the few Scriptures that we can automatically identify simply by citation: John 3:16! As we add the verses before and after we

are presented with a most wonderful message of grace and salvation in the magnitude of God's love. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,"¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." (v.14-17) Jesus made it clear that He must be sacrificed on the cross. Later, Nicodemus see Jesus on the cross with eyes of faith, and own Jesus as his Savior. With Joseph of Arimathea, another secret disciple, they would take possession of Jesus' body and give Him a proper burial. Then all would know their love and devotion for Jesus.

Do we read these words and have the magnitude of this truth pass over our heads? We do grasp what it meant to God the Father that He would send His only begotten Son, the One whom He declared to be His beloved Son into the world to suffer the pangs of death and hell for wretched sinners like us? Do we comprehend what the words of our Lord say, "God so loved the world" THE WHOLE SINFUL WORLD so much that He gave His Son, His beloved Son, His one and only Son into death that we might have life through faith in His name?

This is how we know God. Not just head knowledge, but a knowledge that permeates the heart, that goes to the very core of our existence! Jesus, the Son of God became our Brother to secure righteousness, life, and salvation for a world of sinners, that those who believe in Him may not perish but have everlasting life.

Think of this: God could have sent His Son into the world to condemn the world. That is what the world deserved. That is what we deserve! But God sent His Son into the world that the world through Him might be saved. God sent His Son into the world that **we** might be saved!

On the night before He died Jesus prayed His High Priestly prayer. In that prayer Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." (John 17:3) There is only **one** true God! We come to Him through

faith. We know Him because we know Jesus as Lord and Savior. We have peace with God because of the saving grace of the Triune God. Knowing the Triune God isn't a matter of intellect. It is a matter of faith that comes to us by grace. The Holy Spirit has called us by the gospel. He has changed our hearts, given us new life that we might know the love of God the Father as it has been revealed to us through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, His only Son, our Lord.

May this saving knowledge of the only true God abide in our hearts unto life everlasting!

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.