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The Holy Trinity (Series B)

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Text: John 3:1–17

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

“I believe in the God the Father almighty....” we confess in the Apostles’ Creed. “I believe in one God, the Father almighty...” we confess in the Nicene Creed. And last, the Athanasian Creed concludes with “This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved.” All three of the Ecumenical Creeds state in different ways the same thing: the existence of God the Holy Trinity is an article of faith. We *believe* in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one God who is also three persons. We worship the three divine persons who are one God.

In our scientific age, belief has fallen on hard times; in some ways, faith and belief are considered no more significant than opinion. So when you say that you believe in God, many people simply hear that you have certain opinions about God. As you know, opinions can be taken or ignored. It’s just your opinion.

Facts and cold hard evidence, however, are the order of the day. This kind of thinking has gone so far that many in our world say that unless something can be verified empirically, that is, under controlled, laboratory conditions, it cannot be true. In other words, only naturalistic, scientific knowledge is true. Even concepts like love and hope and joy are reduced to biochemical reactions taking place within the appropriate regions in the brain. This kind of radical world view has been dubbed “scientism” and it is pervasive in our world. It does not allow the possibility of the supernatural which literally means “above nature.” According to scientistic ways of thinking, God and all things spiritual are ruled false from the beginning because they are by definition, beyond nature. To scientism, nature is all there is.

God the Holy Trinity cannot be subjected to the limiting frame of reference defined by empirical science and certainly not by its unholy corruption, scientism. No experiments can be devised to verify empirically the triune nature of God. No philosophical rationale can be adequately formulated that comprehensively defines and describes God. All human attempts simply fall short. They are incapable of putting God into convenient categories.

Jesus says something quite similar in today's gospel reading from John 3. In vs. 12 Jesus says to Nicodemus, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Nicodemus was struggling (vs. 9) with the earthly analogies Jesus was using, the analogies of being born again (vs. 3–7) and about the ability of the wind to blow when and where it wishes (vs. 8). If you can't understand that, O Nicodemus, then how will you understand that the Father, in love, sent His only-begotten Son into the world to save the world and give all believers a new birth from above through the power of the Holy Spirit? If you can't understand earthly things like being born and the blowing of the wind, how will you ever comprehend that God is one in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And that faith in that divine singular plurality – one God in three persons – is required in order to be saved from eternal condemnation.

Let me say it now... faith and belief in God and the supernatural are not contrary to reason or science or logic; faith is not irrational nor is it superstition. But faith and belief do transcend human reason, science, and logic. In fact, the Christian intellectual tradition has always embraced human reason and logic and used them in service to understanding the Bible, theology, and the supernatural. But those God-given human tools could only take you so far.

Jesus said it like this in vs. 6, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." In other words, the flesh – human reason, logic, wisdom, rational discourse, scientific investigations, etc – can tell you things about the flesh, about this natural world – physics, geology, history, medicine, all extremely noble areas of knowledge, but the flesh cannot plumb the depths of the supernatural. That, however, which is born of the Holy Spirit can also understand those things which transcend the things of this world: the supernatural, the spiritual world, the world of faith and belief.

For these two realms are not opposed to each other; one, the spiritual, is above the other, the fleshly. Only human sin and rebellion pits these two realms against each other. Christianity, like no other religion, embraces both the natural and supernatural worlds.

Using two analogies, the Lord Jesus teaches us the things of the Spirit that must be believed in order to have eternal life, faith, and salvation. Along the way, we learn the greatest and highest mystery of all: who God is. The first, and most famous, is the analogy of being again. Vs. 3, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." The point of comparison is simple enough. In order to

be alive in this world, you must have been born. One of the first facts a child learns about itself is its birthday. In our culture, we make learning that day pretty easy. We have birthday parties with cake and singing and gifts, etc. So we understand what Jesus is saying; well, maybe.

The Lord takes that very common, human experience – birth – and says we must be born again (vs. 3). The Greek can be just as easily translated born from above. Either way works pretty well. To see the kingdom of God you must be born again or born from above. This second birth is a spiritual birth for God's kingdom is certainly a spiritual kingdom.

To be alive in this world, you must have been born in this world. Similarly, to be alive in God's spiritual kingdom, you must have been born from above. Nicodemus is thoroughly confused. "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (vs. 4). This very educated teacher in Judaism isn't understanding our Lord's teaching. He's only thinking on the level of the flesh. A man entering his mother's womb a second time! That's preposterous!

The Lord adds further clarity in vs. 5–7, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" Remember when I said earlier that Christianity, like no other religion, embraces and uses the things of this world in service to God's kingdom? Here's a prime example from the Lord Himself. This new birth from above comes about through that most ordinary and vital substance of this world: water. The birth from above comes through water combined with the Holy Spirit! Baptism!!

From the very beginning, this is how God has chosen to work, combining ordinary, tangible things with the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish His gracious work. Genesis records that the divine work of creation began with the Holy Spirit hovering over the face of the waters. This entire universe began with the Spirit working through tangible things to bring life. To be born again, the Holy Spirit works through baptismal waters and creates a child of God. And that's what you are, baptized Christians, children of God who have been born from above!!

By the way, I mentioned earlier that we celebrate our first birth, our natural birth. Why not celebrate your birth from above? Your baptismal birthday when you were born of the Spirit from above?

The second analogy Jesus uses is the ability of the wind to blow seemingly at will and without notice. Vs. 8, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from and where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The work of the Holy Spirit in creating faith cannot be turned on or off like a light switch. I’ve seen this kind of thing numerous times over the years. I’ll witness the work of grace in someone’s life and stand in amazement almost quite literally scratching my head. I didn’t see that coming. Where did that come from? Oh, it’s the Holy Spirit who works like the wind. You hear its sound (you see the proof tangibly) but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. I can’t tell you how amazingly joyful this is! Wow, I really do think I have the best job in the world. But then again, we have the best of the best: God Himself.

So much more can be said about this very rich text of Scripture. Nicodemus is still struggling, “How can these things be? (vs. 9). That’s ok. The Holy Spirit moves as He wishes according to His own time. Nicodemus eventually came around. By the end of John’s gospel, Nicodemus is serving the Lord Jesus as he and Joseph of Arimathea bury the crucified Jesus with love and care. Nicodemus came to faith, was born of the Spirit from above.

He believed in the one God who is three persons. Through the preaching of the Lord Jesus, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Trinity, created faith in God the Father, the 1<sup>st</sup> person of the Trinity, in Nicodemus’ heart. Or to put it less clumsily, through Jesus’ preaching, the Holy Spirit created saving faith in the God the Father.

That’s where this sermon began . . .proclaiming belief in God who is the singular plurality, one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this Trinitarian faith, we are born again from above. This belief embraces human reason and all the things of this world while also transcending them. We get the best of both worlds.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.