

## **A Word from Pastor Preus**

Jesus says that unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Our natural affections, our natural urges, even our most pious and generous thoughts do absolutely nothing to bring us to God. They keep us away. Our success in life, our wealth, our good looks, our moral victories and social charm all drive us deeper into the darkness of ourselves.

*“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”* (John 3:5-6).

In order to see and enter the kingdom of God, we need to know the power of our Baptism to wash our sin away. But first, we need to know our sin. We need to know what our fleshly births have proffered. And so we look at what the law teaches us, and we see what the law condemns. We see that the law is right. We agree with its judgment. But agreeing is not enough. We find no power or willingness to be what God requires us to be. But where the flesh is weak and stubborn, the Spirit is willing. And the Spirit is willing. He is bound by no one. The Spirit is God. He proceeds from Father and Son together and so blows where the Father and the Son want him to go, because the will of God is one.

And where does he blow? Where does he bring us to look but to where God condemned sin in the flesh once and for all as his own Son from eternity suffered for your sin and for mine? The punishment and anger that we see lashed out on Jesus as he bears the stripes and torture of crucifixion was the anger of God against the very sin in which our flesh was conceived. In the symbol of the crucifix, we don't just see an identification that we're in a Lutheran Church. No, we also see the true nature of sin. We see what the Spirit wants us to remember. We see what identifies Jesus as our Savior who gives us true life.

Nicodemus knew Jesus was some sort of prophet, like, say, Moses who lifted up the bronze snake in the wilderness. The people had complained. They mocked God. God sent poisonous snakes to bite them and kill them. They asked Moses to intercede: “We have sinned,” they cried. Moses

pled their case and God told him to erect the very likeness of the snakes that were causing them to die. But this snake brought life, because God said it would.

We have sinned. The poison of the serpent's lie saturates our flesh and corrupts our reason and will. It brings death. We need a new life. We cry for mercy to our God who sees us in our misery. And the Spirit of God who knows our every weakness, and who bears with our wayward will, intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. But that which words cannot express can most certainly be impressed upon our hearts – the image of Christ crucified for sinners.

*“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”* (John 3:14-15).

The snake was lifted up. There see the venom of the bite overcome. That's what Moses preached. Christ was crucified for you. There see the poison of sin purged. That's what the Spirit preaches. Because Jesus tells him to. Jesus, who knows you better than you know yourself, who knows your sin more intimately than your heart knows your blood took your sin upon himself, and welcomed the Father's scorn and abandonment in order to reconcile you to himself. He who knew no sin became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. He who was born in innocence in order to die as a sinner, burst forth from the womb of the earth on the third day in glorious life in order to give us new birth by the Holy Spirit through the water of Holy Baptism.

Jesus is more than a prophet. Nicodemus saw marvelous works and assumed that Jesus was a great man who came from God. But we have seen more glorious works. We have seen our sin borne for us on the cross. We have seen the forgiveness brought to us from heaven as God serves us here. We have seen our salvation prepared before our eyes and before the face of all people. We have seen the works of God. And so we have concluded rightly, as Jesus lays claim, that he is more than a prophet from God. He is very God of very God who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever.

– **Pastor John Christian Preus**