**John 3:1-17**

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This 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.” **3** Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” **4** Nicodemus 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?” **5** Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, 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 its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” **9** Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” **10** Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? **11** Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. **12** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **13**  No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. **14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **16** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** 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.

**“A Living Hope By New Birth”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The need to belong is something that comes natural in life. A person has a family from day one, lives among a community of people, and resides in a nation. At least that is the ideal that some may be blessed to have. However, as we know, much of life today for many has fallen into confusion. Families are diverse and often distant. Looking around at communities most struggle to keep things together. Even nations seem overwhelmed with one conflict after another. Is it a wonder that belonging is so difficult today? Let alone, individualism has led to setting standards of what it means “for me” to belong.

Life suffers at the hand of sinners, but Lent leads us to belong to the new life given by Christ. The early church used the season of Lent and its call of repentance to prepare adult converts for baptism. It came with fasting and prayer as Jesus did when He was in the wilderness forty days. These newbies were not singled out like at a fraternity hazing to see how much a person can take or to be humiliated before others. Instead, the whole church joined in on the serious need of repentance looking to that great day of Easter. It was on this day, baptism by the risen Jesus would give these new converts a true kingdom of forgiveness, life and salvation. The Gospel according to St. John sets that tone today. You must be born again, Jesus must be lifted up, and baptism must mean we belong in God’s kingdom.

The first “must” makes it hard for anyone to hear. Jesus said, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” It was especially overwhelming to hear for someone like Nicodemus. As a Jew, he was in the bloodline of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob having the promise of God’s kingdom. As a Pharisee, he was a decent person to others in terms of the Law. As a ruler of the Jews, he sat on the Sanhedrin where the important decisions happened. As a teacher, he had studied knowledge and skill of God’s Word. Even his name, Nicodemus, meant “conqueror of the people” showing a certain kind of popularity. This man knew where he belonged in terms of family, community, and nation. Yet, having all of this, he comes at night not to accuse, but seeking answers to the signs and words of Jesus. It is in his desire to know that earthly belonging came undone because it could only be by water and the Spirit.

Go ahead a try to look elsewhere. Christ says to all, “you must be born again.” The assurance of belonging to Christ cannot come from family, community, or nation. We are at the mercy of God for new life. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” To be “born again” is not as some preach teaching to rest salvation on my decision for such birth. Did you decide when to come into this world? Neither can we see our coming into God’s kingdom by resting it upon a decision. The expression, “Born again” literally means, “Born from above.” All the work must be from God doing it because man cannot produce this new life. St. Paul said, “What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?” It means Christ’s kingdom is a belonging by undeserved favor and not from any form of favoritism. Baptism gives life for it washes away sins, brings the Holy Spirit, and gives faith in God’s promising Word.

If the first “must” is hard to hear, the second “must” makes ALL the difference to see. Jesus said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up…” Nicodemus learned the true teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures that he held so dear. God made His kingdom not by the Law that had no life, but from the Gospel that would give life. Rather than a ritual rite of water, which the Pharisee already practiced, Nicodemus was to see the power of baptism came from the Word. In the face of Jesus, God was taking the action necessary to save humanity. Nicodemus would know what new life meant not on the night he came to Jesus, but when Jesus placed His life in agony and darkness on the cross. God saved His people of old by the promising Word Moses lifted up in a bronze serpent. Now Jesus was taking upon Himself the sins of the world and the Word become flesh was for all to see Him as Savior.

Where belonging in this world has boundaries for families ties, confession of churches or citizens of a nation. God shows all belong in His kingdom by the difference He made for sinners. “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.” Like Nicodemus, it is easy to doubt such good news saying, “How can these things be?” When we consider the broken instability of families, numerous church bodies fit for personal preference, and conflicted nations warring from within, where is the light? Like Israel, none can escape the venomous bite of sin and death. There is no cure in making people unsinful as so many try to do by justifying sin or covering it up. Only one way sucks out the deathly bite caused by the Devil. It comes from the dedication of God for us. Jesus assures that the entrance to God’s kingdom is open by His sacrifice. His resurrection proclaims new life so none need perish for the Word is a promise lifted up for all.

Finally, the hidden “must” is what makes belonging secure. It is not the water of baptism that has the glory but the Word of salvation poured upon a sinner. It is not the act of repenting that is so special, but the humble heart that hopes to hear Jesus forgive my sins. It is not the experience of communion that is great, but the Savior who is present to say, “Given and shed for you.” The hidden “must” is a gift from God. It is what allowed Nicodemus later to be at the cross to take down the body of Jesus and prepare Him for burial. Marvel that where God gives genuine faith good fruit will follow. St. Paul does not hide from boasting over our greatest security. He proclaims, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”

Man seeks to know everything today, but Jesus proves salvation does not belong to us. “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Either the security is from what God says by His Word alone or we build idols of false security that have no life in them. Luther states, “The physical sound and external form of the word you can hear quite well; but you do not see the power of the word, what it accomplishes, how the Spirit works with and through the word. That is why the word has to be believed, even when what it says is contrary to what human reason sees or feels. Once you start arguing about how it takes place, the ball game is lost” (House Postils 214). Let us not lose security in what God gladly gives by the Gospel, sacrificed in His Son, and keeps as the word of promise to save. You must be born again, Jesus must be lifted up, and baptism must mean we belong in God’s kingdom. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.