

A New Life of the Spirit

John 3:1-17

The Second Sunday in Lent, March 12, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

On February 9, 1972 in a small hospital in Winchester, Kansas, I came forth from my mother. I was born by C-section so where most of you went out the door, I went out the window. It was necessary to save my life. My father and mother report that there were several unnecessary people in the birthing room when I came out of my mother including the man who was serving my family at the time as their dentist. Why he was there, I do not know and it seems strange to me that he was there, but in those days fathers were not permitted in the birthing room and so Dad was somewhere else waiting news of his firstborn son.

All of you can give an account like that one. Almost all of you have received the account of your birth from your parents or from someone else who knows the account. And even if you are one of those unique people who do not know the account of your birth, your account exists like everyone else. There was someone there to see you born. There was a point in time when you came forth and you came forth in some location. Some of you were born at home. Some of you were born in hospitals. Some of you were born under unique circumstances. And now that I am using this illustration many of you will want to share your account of either yourself or your children and I will look forward to hearing them.

And so it is with those who are born of the flesh. We know where they come from. We also know where they are going.

I have been present when people have died. I can think of two members of the congregation where I arrived shortly after they had died. With one member of the congregation I was present when the nurse pronounced the child of God to be dead. I have seen corpses before they were taken to the funeral home. Most of them look pretty good because I saw them shortly after they died, but there was one who when I arrived I discovered that the funeral director had been delayed. I went into the room where he was lying and he was nearly as white as the sheets upon which he had died. His mouth was hanging open and his widow was weeping over his chest.

And I have presided over numerous funerals. And as an aside, "funeral" is not a dirty word. There is nothing wrong with the word funeral. The word funeral comes from the Latin word for body. Funeral is a term that shows respect for the body which our Lord Jesus Christ will raise. It is only the unbelievers who think that a funeral and a celebration are mutually exclusive terms. Believers should and ought to know better, that when one has a funeral, one is having a celebration and not a celebration of the person's life for the person's life was filled with sin. It is a celebration of the resurrection, but more on that later.

You have attended numerous funerals, more than you would like to count. Everyone winds up in pretty much the same place. It does not matter if you have the body embalmed or cremated, the body winds up in a container in the ground. There are a few exceptions for those who burned in fires or drowned at sea. But for the most part the end of life is pretty consistent. There is a body in a container in the earth. The place where the body is lowered into the earth is typically marked by a stone or some other marker so that we know that someone's body was buried there. Those who grieve the loss of the dead person typically go to the place where the dead go to grieve and to leave flowers there.

And so it is with everyone who is born of the flesh. With those who are born of the flesh we can see from where they have come and we can see where they are going.

It is not so with those who are born of the Spirit.

Jesus is one such person. We know from the apostolic records that Jesus was born of Mary the wife of Joseph. We know from the apostolic record that He was born in Bethlehem. But we also know from the apostolic record that that is not all there is to say about Jesus. Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Him.

This raises a lot of questions. Most of us know the place where we were born, and some of us suspect the place where we were conceived, Maybe your parents told you or maybe they were modest about such information and for some reason I find it strange that most people do not want to think about it. Perhaps they do not want to think about their parents doing that particular miracle of God. But they did and the result is you. Why we even have cameras that have recorded sperm fertilizing an egg and when we watch those videos we try very hard not to think about how that video was taken.

But Jesus' mother was a virgin. There was no man. He was simply conceived and then was born. Joseph thought about divorcing Mary because he figured that she had committed adultery. But God told Joseph that what was conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit. The apostolic testimony is consistent on this point. The Holy Spirit conceived Jesus when Jesus was conceived. Mary did not produce Jesus of herself. No man produced Jesus at all. When it comes to bringing forth the Savior of the world only two people are involved, the Holy Spirit and a woman, Mary.

So while we know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem to Mary. Joseph was there to witness it. The shepherds came shortly thereafter, no one saw His true origins. No one who is born of the flesh knows where Jesus comes from. That is why in John chapter seven there are people having an argument about where Jesus comes from. Ultimately they don't know. And even though Nicodemus in John chapter three claims to know that Jesus is from God when Jesus begins speaking to him about the things of God Nicodemus has no idea what He is talking about. If Nicodemus does not know what Jesus is talking about when Jesus speaks of the things of God, how does Nicodemus have the credentials necessary to assert at the beginning of his conversation with Jesus that Jesus is from God? Nicodemus has no idea what he is talking about.

And so it is with the people who are born of the Spirit. You cannot see from whence they came.

The death of Jesus is similar.

We know where Jesus died. There are more accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus from Nazareth than any other historical event. When people say that what they mean is that the crucifixion of Jesus is referenced more times in the documentation of the New Testament than any other historical even in all of recorded history. One wonders whether or not they were counting the resurrection also, but I will save that for another time. Even Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, records the crucifixion of Jesus from Nazareth.

He died on a cross outside of Jerusalem on a hill called Calvary or Golgotha. We are pretty sure we know the location of this hill. But even if we do not know the hill, we know that it is outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is still standing to this day. We could go to Jerusalem and see the place where He died. In fact thousands of Christian pilgrims do exactly that every Good Friday.

But there are problems with the death of Jesus. Unlike our deaths there is no grave to which we may go to commemorate His death. The graves that we commemorate are graves that mark the place where the bodies of the dead ones we are honoring reside. You cannot do that with Jesus. There are two locations in Jerusalem that are put forth as the place of Jesus' burial. Even if one of those locations is correct, He is not there. Even if we could definitively prove the location of the tomb of our Lord, His body would still not be there. There is nothing to dig up. There is nothing to see.

According to the apostolic record, Jesus rose from the dead and then instructed His apostles for another forty days. He then ascended into heaven. The creed faithfully records the apostolic testimony. When we look into the sky like the apostles did at our Lord's ascension we do not see Jesus. All we see is the weather and if you are blessed enough to live out where I live, the stars.

And so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Just as you cannot see where they came from, you cannot see where they went. You cannot see where the Spirit comes from. You cannot see where the Spirit is going. All you can do is hear His voice. Such is everyone who is born of the Spirit.

If you want to wind up where Jesus went you must be born of the Spirit.

But flesh gives birth to flesh and the Spirit gives birth to spirit. Notice that the Spirit does not give birth to flesh, neither does the flesh give birth to the Spirit so if we want to go where Jesus is gone we must be born of the Spirit but we cannot be born of the Spirit because we are born of the flesh and flesh only gives birth to flesh. And so we must be born again. If we expect to see the Kingdom of God and enter it we must be born again.

What does it mean to be born again? It means that there is a brand new you. Just as the first you was an act of creation so the new you is an act of creation. God brought you forth from the womb of your mothers in a mighty act of creation. He brought you forth from the womb of your mothers with His mighty word. Listen to the word that He gave to humanity when He made them male and female, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the beasts of the field. I give you every green plant for food." No amount of masculinity and femininity in the world will bring forth one child without that almighty word. All the sex in the world will not bring forth one child had God not given that word in the beginning when He made them male and female. The fact that you were born at all is because God spoke His word in the beginning and that Word of God is still effective yet to this day. God made you. He made you through the instrumentality of your parents or your birth parents, but he still made you.

If the birth according to the flesh is not done without the word of God, then the rebirth according to the Spirit is also not done without His Word. No one just up and decides to become a brand new person. We do not have the power to do that. Just as we do not have the power to be born we also do not have the power to be born again The Word of God must bring forth the new creation just as the Word of God brought forth the old one. And what is the Word of God that brings forth this new life.

It is a simple one and it is two things.

First, the Son of Man will be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. In order to understand this, you need to understand what our Lord is talking about when He talks about Moses and the serpent.

It refers to the Old Testament account of Israel's journey in the wilderness under Moses. While in the wilderness the people gripe against God and God punishes them for their back talk by sending serpents among them. These serpents were poisonous. They bit the people and many of them died. When this happened the people repented of their sin and begged God for relief. God responded to them by directing Moses to have a bronze serpent made and put it on a pole. Once that was done God promised that any Israelite who was bitten by a poisonous serpent could look at the serpent on the pole. Anyone who did this lived. If a person was bitten by a poisonous serpent and did not do this, he died.

I think it is obvious that this involves faith. If a person does not believe the promise of God that he will live if he looks at the bronze serpent, he won't bother to look at the serpent and he will die. Unbelievers do not bother with the means by which God bestows salvation. If a person has faith and

believes what God said about the bronze serpent, then if he gets bit by a poisonous serpent the first place he is going to look is at the bronze serpent. Only believers take the time to make use of the means whereby God bestows salvation.

Jesus says that He will be lifted up in the same way. So when Jesus talks about being lifted up, He is not talking about His later ascension into heaven. The bronze serpent did not go up into heaven. The bronze serpent went up on a pole. Jesus is talking about when the Son of Man is lifted up on a pole. He is talking about His cross and crucifixion.

Jesus therefore says that He Himself is the means for the new creation. Anyone who is subject to death and looks at Jesus will no longer be subject to death. It is obvious that this involves faith. People who do not believe what Jesus says about Himself do not bother with Jesus to deal with death. Only those people who believe what Jesus said about Himself will bother to look to Him for salvation from death.

Therefore the Word of Jesus about His cross has made you new people. You are new creations because of the word that He has spoken to you about His cross. You are here looking to His cross for salvation from the death that you can see.

No one can see why you are here at the Divine Service looking to your Savior. No unbeliever can look at you and understand why you got up this morning got into your cars and came to the Divine Service. No unbeliever can look at the Divine Service and for the life of them think why you would do this and place so much importance in it. It is because you are born of the Spirit and no one can see where those who are born of the Spirit come from. No one can see where your faith came from, not even you, but it came forth, like all created things come forth, at the Word of God.

The second word that brings for the new birth is what God declares about the new birth. Unless someone is born of water and of the Spirit that person cannot enter the Kingdom of God. God declares of the Spirit that it comes with water. God declares with the new birth that it comes with water. He is not talking about amniotic fluid as some suppose, because that would be the old birth that we can see. He is talking about the new birth of water and of the Spirit. It is something that cannot be seen even though water is visible.

No one can see where the faith of a baptized person comes from. No one can see where the faith of a baptized person is going. One can only hear the Word of God that as the Spirit came down on our Lord at His baptism so the Spirit comes down on you at yours.

Now another aside. I know that some of you are legalists and when you hear the words, "Unless someone is born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God," you will come to the conclusion that unless a person is baptized they are damned. And if you further conclude that is not true on the basis of other Scriptures then you will have to conclude that those other Scriptures contradict this one. In other words if the thief on the cross is saved without baptism in Luke's Gospel how can Jesus tell Nicodemus in John's Gospel that unless someone is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God? Do John and Luke disagree? You could say that John's Gospel is not talking about Baptism, but then if you do you are left with the nagging question of what Jesus mean when He talks about being born again of water and of the Spirit. If that does not mean baptism what does it mean?

Ok. While Jesus is making a general statement, He is making the statement to Nicodemus in a conversation that they had at night. This statement is intended for Nicodemus. When it came to the thief on the cross Jesus said something else. Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus baptized and indeed Nicodemus should already be baptized for he is a ruler of the Pharisees and the Pharisees have already gone out to John the Baptist and heard his testimony. The problems is that Nicodemus does not have faith. That is why he marvels at everything that Jesus says and asks, "How can these things be?"

They can be because of the Word of the Father which creates the new life. When it does you are born again. So the conclusion that you should draw for yourselves is that unless you are simply an unbeliever and do not believe the Word of God that baptism saves you, you rejoice in the word that He has spoken both of His cross and of His baptism because by these things you are born again and when you are born again no one of the flesh can see where you are going.

God through Jesus Christ has promised you an everlasting life after you rise from the dead. This everlasting life will take place in a new heaven and a new earth which God will create for you. Can you see any of that? No! It is all in the future. But so it is with those who are born of the Spirit, No one can see where they came from, that is how they got faith, because it came from a cross and a baptism that look like they do nothing, and neither will anyone be able to tell where you are going, but going there you are.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.