**John 3:1-17 March 8, 2020**

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

Our text for this morning comes from the Gospel of John the 3rd chapter here re-reading these words. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What’s the catch? There’s always a catch isn’t there? Something in life that just seems too good to be true? We all have seen promotions that promise a free week of a particular service, and we are excited to sign up. But as we put in our information, we find that we have to put in our credit card information. The truth is the service is free, but only for one week. And if you don’t cancel the trial after a certain number of days, you will be billed for the service. That’s the catch. There always seems to be a catch. Get 1 tire free, with the purchase of 3 other tires. Deals like 20 dollars off with a minimum purchase of 40. 10 dollars off the purchase of only this one particular item. And there’s not just catches in coupons and the like. We all have gotcha moments in our lives when we have been fooled. It seems you have to be quick on your feet to spot them. Nobody likes to be swindled or fooled. And over time, we learn to always look for the catch. Which is why, when Jesus tells Nicodemus that He must be born again, Nicodemus knows there has to be some kind of catch. After all, as Nicodemus says, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” He’s simply asking Jesus, what’s the catch? And it’s no different for us. When we read, later in John 3:16 that “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” We ask, well, what’s the catch? Because salvation can’t possibly be as simple as Jesus makes it out in John 3:16. There has to be….a catch.

Nicodemus should have known better than to ask Jesus these questions. Jesus himself calls him a teacher of Israel, he was a member of the Sanhedrin, and a great Jewish scholar. Later on in the Scriptures we find Nicodemus again, as he is there when Jesus is buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Despite Nicodemus’s credentials as a great teacher of Israel, Jesus remarks that He does not have any understanding. A part of that misunderstanding comes from the authority that Jesus speaks of. Because while Nicodemus did not completely understand all of Jesus’ teaching, He knew that Jesus was not like any other prophet. He recognized that Jesus was different. Jesus was worth looking into. Nicodemus knew that if he was discovered coming to Jesus with questions and not accusations he would lose his reputation among the Pharisees. But it was worth it to Nicodemus to seek Jesus out and question him. Because Nicodemus himself says that Jesus had to be a teacher come from God, for no one could do the things that Jesus did unless God was with him.

So why does Nicodemus assume there is a catch in what Jesus says? And why do we? Jesus spells it out plainly, he does not pull punches with Nicodemus, or us for that matter in His Word. He even tells us “Truly, truly” meaning “listen up, this is the important stuff”. Jesus teaches Nicodemus and us saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you unless one is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Hmmm….born again. What could this possibly mean? What is the catch? Oh! What Jesus really meant was that we, have to somehow initiate our own rebirth and do something in order to earn our salvation. But wait, it’s not possible for us to enter again into our mother’s womb….So what’s the catch?

Sadly that’s how our minds work. You can blame it on our culture, where we are constantly being schemed, or you can blame it on a past experience where our trust was taken advantage of, but we all have a sense of hesitation when we talk about salvation coming from anything or anywhere but ourselves. Because we look to our own actions, for self-satisfaction. And really, what we want more than anything, is to be in control. We want to base our salvation on a singular moment when we worked together with God to bring about eternal life. Because then we can point to that moment, and know with certainty that salvation is ours. That we did something. So if we have to be born again, then we will be the ones to enter again into our mother’s wombs. If salvation is the gift of God, then we will be the ones to reach out and grab it, because at the center of our salvation is our own works. Or that’s what we want to think. But that’s where the catch is. We can’t do it. We can’t enter again into our mother’s wombs. As a matter of fact, if we stop for a moment and think about what Jesus is saying, we don’t have anything to do with entering the Kingdom of God. Because a baby, does not decide it’s time to be born. A baby does not birth itself, it does not change itself, it does not feed itself, it does not stop itself from crying by rocking itself to sleep, it does burp itself, it does not go and get itself a bottle. A baby, doesn’t do anything for itself. A baby has to be taken care of, and a baby receives all the care and love of it’s parents. A baby does not decide to be born.

Life, for a baby, and for all of us, is a gift. Something that is given to us. Something that we in no way earned by any of our own actions. Life, is the gift of God. So why do we assume that eternal life, would be any different? Look at what Jesus says to Nicodemus’s reply. Jesus does not chastise him or look at him like he is a fool, but he spells it out for him **again.** “Truly, truly” again he repeats these words. Meaning that these words should be keyed in on as very very important. Truly, truly I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. A rebirth of water and the Spirit. A new life created from the drowning of the old and sinful self and a new man emerging and being born. That’s the moment. That’s the catch, or if anything, it’s the evidence that there isn’t a catch when it comes to salvation. Because in Baptism, we are given salvation and a new life. It is a gift. It has nothing to do with our own actions.

Baptism. The washing of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit. The moment when The Holy Spirit, as Titus says in chapter 3, saves us through this washing and renewing. And when we, the ones justified by His grace, become heirs of God our Heavenly Father, receiving from him the hope and assurance of eternal life. If you want a singular moment, a moment that you can tell others with sure confidence, of when you became a Christian and a child of God. That moment is your Baptism. That moment is when you were baptized into the name of the Triune God and marked as God’s redeemed with a cross upon your forehead and upon your heart. And most importantly, that is a moment when you received the gift of eternal life, without any action on your behalf. You did not accept His salvation. You did not decide to be born again anymore than a child decides it wants to be born. You received salvation as a free gift of God. There was no catch. It was as true as it was when Nicodemus heard it in John chapter 3. In order to enter the Kingdom of God you must be born again through the water and the Spirit, and you have been, for you are a baptized and redeemed child of God.

Because salvation is a gift. While John chapter 3 is known for Christ’s words about Baptism, it also contains what has widely been called, the Gospel in a nutshell. John 3:16. It’s one of the most well known verses in the entire Bible, one that has been put on countless shirts, wristbands, bookmarks, and coffee mugs just to name a few of the ways it’s been marketed to our society. But it’s more than that. It lives up to its hype, like so few things do in our world today. And while it may not be understood by our society for what it is, let there be no confusion about its overall message. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” God gave His Son, so that you have eternal life. That’s it. That’s all there is to know. That is the message. And while, when someone gives you a gift you do nothing in it’s reception but open your hands and receive it. You don’t do anything to add to your salvation. It’s a gift. A gift through Baptism. A gift through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. For God’s love sent Jesus into this world to perish, in order that you wouldn’t. He sent His Son here to Earth to die and give up His life, so that you would have life eternal. And He did not send Jesus to meet you halfway so that you can do the rest, but He came to create in us new hearts and redeem us with His blood.

A gift, that’s what God gave you. Just as your parents gave you life, and your mother brought you into this world, you were brought into God’s Holy family through the washing away of your sin in the waters of Holy Baptism. And we constantly come to the Baptismal font of Christ, and remember that day, because it is a moment that stays with us forever. It is the moment, we gained a new family, a family of believers here on Earth, and in heaven. A family that will not pass away, but a family that will stay with us and support and defend us until the end of time. May God bless you as you grow in your faith. And may you always remember the life that is yours, through your Birth into new life, in the waters of Holy Baptism.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.