

Who Am I?

Text: Genesis 12:1-4

Romans 4:1-5,13-17 (Series A. 2nd Sunday in Lent) Ps. 121

John 3:1-17

Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again.

Let us pray:

This is the day the Lord has made, a new month, a new week and a new day. A day of thanksgiving and praise to our God and Saviour. "*Who are you?*" That's a question we are asked frequently. In answering, we usually give our *name*, where we come from and even what kind of work we do. "Hi! My name is Samuel, and I'm a pastor of *St. Ansgar Lutheran Church*". Sometimes we have to do a little more than that to prove who we are.

If I wanted to open an account at the bank, I would need to provide some other evidence of who I am – a driver's license with my name, photo and signature. If I want to go overseas, or travel to the States I would need a passport, something that tells who I am. When stop by a police officer he /she would ask for a driver's license.

When we visit a doctor, a dentist or an accountant in their office you will see various certificates hanging on the wall – degrees from universities, membership certificates – all very impressive.

There's nothing wrong with doing that – this is important for establishing reputation, right. If you want a tax accountant to prepare your tax return, it's good to be certain that he / she knows what he / she is doing.

You've probably got a few certificates for various things tucked away somewhere. I have – from high school, and from college and seminary, from various courses, and seminars that I have participated in. These certificates are a reminder of the various things I have *done* to achieve them.

But there's one particular certificate that I have, which I am very proud of. You have one at home too, tucked away safely in a shoebox or drawer. We don't take it out very often – and that's our *baptismal certificate*.

This certificate proves who we are but it has nothing to do with how clever we are, what schools we went to, what organizations we belong to and etc. This is one certificate we didn't have to work for. It was given to us, not because we were particularly good, or because we have earned it in some way. Our baptismal certificate was simply given to us.

This piece of paper (*holding up baptismal certificate*) has nothing to do with something I did, or what I achieved through any hard work. This certificate refers to something that God did for me. This doesn't *state what I did, it states who I am*.

On the day of our baptism, through a very simple act involving pouring of water or total immersion along with God's Word of promise, a wonderful *new relationship* with God was begun. God did something for us. He made a commitment to each and every one of us.

- ❖ He promised to *keep on loving us*. When we are feeling down in the dumps, depressed, upset with the way life is turning out, unhappy with ourselves our baptism reminds us that our heavenly Father has made a covenant with us that he will always be there to help, support and comfort us.
- ❖ When we were baptized, we were linked to Jesus – his cross and resurrection. God promised that the *forgiveness and righteousness* that Jesus won on the cross is ours. We stand in a special and holy relationship with God.
- ❖ So, when we feel a sense of failure, our baptism reminds us that Jesus forgives us and won't keep on rubbing our sin in our face. It has been all paid for!

At our baptism, God established a relationship with us, just as he has done from the early days of human history. In the Old Testament, he called people and established a relationship with them.

Likewise, on the day we were baptized God *established a covenant* with us and promised, *"I will be your God and you will be my people"* (Jer 11:33). When we are afraid and the road ahead looks hard and uncertain, our baptism reminds us of the promise of God that he would always be near.

Like a loving parent who is never too far away from a small child, calming their fears, comforting them when they are hurting, likewise God the Father promises through our baptism that he is with us always.

At our baptism, God gave us the *Holy Spirit* who enables us to trust in Jesus, who gives us the faith and confidence to rely on our heavenly Father to take care of our every need. Daily God reminds us of Christ's forgiveness when we fail and enables us to walk the ways of God.

What is even more amazing is that God has made this commitment toward us, not because of our commitment to him, not because we have decided to follow Jesus, not because we have been especially good and deserve this kind of favour. He constantly affirms that we are his children.

No doubt, this baptismal certificate is the best certificate of all that I have. It says that I am God's child and that his love for me is unbelievably strong. Nicodemus came to Jesus one night. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a group of people who were always trying to find fault with what Jesus taught.

But Nicodemus wasn't like that. He wanted to know more about Jesus. He was confused. His training included strict observance of all kinds of religious rules and a very regulated worship life. This, he was told, was the way to be right with God.

What he had learnt as a Pharisee seemed to be so different to what Jesus taught. Before he could even ask his question, Jesus says, *"I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again."*

If Nicodemus was confused before he met with Jesus, he is even more confused now. How irrational is the suggestion that a grown man could return to his mother's womb and be born again.

The new birth that Jesus is talking about is from above. Getting into the Kingdom of God is not something you and I are able to accomplish; it is something that comes *"from above"*, given by God freely and graciously.

No one gets into the Kingdom of God by being a *"good person"*! Nicodemus had devoted his life to being good, trying to live up to the standards his religion said he had to meet in order to please God and to win a place in God's kingdom. And he did it relatively well, better than most.

Nicodemus was *good*, he was a very good person. But the fact is this. No amount of goodness is good enough to establish a relationship with God or to get us into the kingdom of heaven! The Scripture clear on this: *"all our righteous acts are like filthy rags"* Isa. 64:6. In the Book of Romans 3:23 it says: *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift"*

Jesus says that it's not a matter of being *"good"*, it's a matter of *"being born anew"*, or it's not a matter of being *"good"*, it's a matter of *"being born from above"*. This means *"being born of water and the Spirit."* Just as Nicodemus contributed nothing to his own physical birth into the world, likewise he contributes nothing to his spiritual birth into the Kingdom of God.

Life is a pure gift in each case! The new birth into the kingdom of God is a gift by God's power. In other words, Jesus is saying: *"You can't do it Nicodemus, but God can! God can transform you and I from the inside out and make us good enough! This is what Christ has done for us"*.

- ❖ He died to save our lives.
- ❖ He has made us right with God.
- ❖ He has made us fit to be members of the family of God.

The story continues in John 3:17, Jesus tells Nicodemus that *God did not send the Son...to condemn the world, but...that the world might be saved through him.*

Coming to Jesus begins when we take stock of the earthly *"values"* that separate us from God and one another and opens the door to the Spirit already working within us.

That awakening is a new birth which begins to show through us. It deepens our faith and commitment and strengthens us to attempt more obedience, have more trust, and be more faithful to the life that Christ is teaching us to follow. And draw us near to the love of God who never leaves us behind.

Our Faith can be shaken and still endure. Our Faith can be sought even if not understood. Thomas Aquinas, 13th century theologian/philosopher said: ***“To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible.”*** It takes spiritual mind to understand spiritual things.

To move deeper into faith and commitment is to journey as Abraham – new land, new language, new life. With the baptism of the Spirit we are reborn, we take new steps in faith, and follow Christ, our Lord.

We aren't called to be perfect but we are perfectly called by a love greater than mere human words can express. *"For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life" (John 3:16).* That is God's gift to each and every one of us. Forgiveness and eternal life through his Son's death and resurrection.

This piece of paper (*in my hand*) is only a piece of paper. It has no magical powers. But does remind me that God has given me his "okay". I can get strength from that; I can feel that I belong; it is a tool that I can use to confront any kind of situation, because I know that I have God's tick of approval on me.

We know that we have been blessed with his Spirit and that he has promised that he will be always be there for us. What many of us need is not so much an "in-filling" of the Holy Spirit but an *activating* of everything God is and everything he has to offer.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. We aren't deserving but God is giving us every opportunity to bring our penitent hearts and imperfect faith to this relationship. *Kris Sorby's.....recover from serious illness. Thanks to the miracle modern medicine.*

I am 72 years old and this blue aging certificate doesn't look very impressive, but it's a tangible reminder of:

- ❖ God's mystery and awesomeness.
- ❖ It's a reminder of his grace, love and faithfulness. Through the ups and downs of life.
- ❖ A relationship that is a gift from God.
- ❖ I treasure it.
- ❖ Baptism – being linked to Christ is the best we have. According to Martin Luther, "*A Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever continued*" (*The Large Catechism*," Book of Concord).

Abraham had faith; righteous faith, that is, he was *right* with God. He trusted God and that trust was demonstrated by his obedience. Faith takes root when we obey.

Like me, you've probably got all kinds of documents and certificates that remind you what you've done. This one (*holding up certificate*) reminds us of who we are – a child of God.

Now I would like each and every one of us to find three people this week: And put a Smile on their face, love in their heart and Encouraging words.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Amen.

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