

John 3:1-17
Second Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2026

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

If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week, the Gospel Reading pointed us to Jesus, Israel reduced to One. Today, the Gospel Reading points us to Jesus, the “only” Son... whom God gave as the Messiah, for He in this way loved the world, so that whoever believes in that Son shall not have *death* everlasting but *life* everlasting. This, we like to say, is the Gospel in a nutshell.

It is absolutely crucial that we hear the joy and comfort of this Gospel *rightly*, for – if we are like Nicodemus – we tend to hear and discuss the Christian faith as a united collection of theological *concepts* in which to believe, on which to meditate, by which we prove and improve our faith unto eternal life.

In the Lenten season, we especially urge ourselves to get better at believing, to double-down on our reading of Scripture, to study and ponder and meditate upon the heavenly truths more deeply. And, while every pastor would exhort Christians to dwell

richly in the Word of God (not only in Lent, but in all our lives), we must be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that faith in the Gospel is a matter of learning and articulating a wealth of theological *concepts*. Certainly, there *are* concepts to learn, as is done in catechism instruction, but those concepts are not just random ideas loosely tied to one another to make up a united dogma created by man, to be blindly believed or only believed when academically understood.

Rather, faith completely clings to and hopes in and depends upon a person – the only Son... that only Son who pointed out and called out Nicodemus' misunderstanding of faith as simply some conceptual knowledge of heavenly things. Jesus called out this misunderstanding when he corrected Nicodemus, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." There it is, Nicodemus... faith is not about finding ways to train ourselves to think about God... to ponder heavenly things, as if our minds float into the heavens, ascend into the divine throne room, and there, dwell on the mysteries of God Most High.

No; faith is hope in the One who came down from heaven: "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." – "Who for us men and our salvation *came down from heaven.*" Yes, hope in him, not according to how your philosophically-driven mind wants to interpret him, but according to how God defines him, as God sees his saving purpose: "As Moses

lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

There it is! God defines the Christ by the cross, by his being placed on that cross as the sin-bearer for all doomed by the venom of the Serpent’s bite; and whoever believes *in him* (in the righteous merit of that sin-bearer) has exactly what he hopes that sin-bearer would win: eternal life. Yes, rest your hopes for eternity in the Christ of the cross, *in him*. But, Christ *apart* from the cross is not the “in him” whom God has given for us to hope in for salvation. Christ *apart* from the cross becomes to our mind a teacher, a philosopher, a purveyor of heavenly wisdom, a life coach who leads us to ponder heavenly concepts... and we’re right back to wanting to meditatively ascend into the heavens for theological thought with Nicodemus.

Instead, stick with Christ crucified, for in this person of Jesus is all of God’s dealing with sinful man: “For God *in this way* loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes *in him* shall not perish (eternal *death*) but have eternal *life*.” And then, importantly, verse 17 drives home the point that God deals with man only through this Jesus: “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.”

Thus, never hear the word “faith” apart from the phrase “in Christ.” If you hope God will be pleased with your faith because of how knowledgeable it is, how pure it is, how unwavering it is, He will

not be... and you will eventually despair because you *know* the strength of your faith is less than God-pleasing. Faith is not righteous in itself; it is *counted* righteous because the Christ in whom it hopes is righteous.

Isn't this exactly the point that Paul makes in the Epistle Reading when explaining the call of Abram as recounted in the Old Testament reading? How many want to say that Abram was called into some generic faith of general God-knowledge, that his faith was pure as the driven snow, and that God saved him by the merit of this faith! – and in their understanding of God's dealing with Abraham, there is no mention of the Christ!

Paul begins by asking, "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" Notice, Abraham did not generically "believe *in* God;" he "believed God," Paul says. He believed God's promise. And, what was God's promise? Was it limited to what we hear in Genesis 12, that Abram would be a numerically great nation? Was the covenant simply that Abram would have a great legacy and leave a numerically large footprint upon the earth? Or, was it that through Abraham's line the Christ would come so that "in you *all* the families of the earth" – not *just* the biological line of Abraham (as if the genealogy was the height of the covenantal promise) – "*all* the families of the earth will be blessed." Blessed because the Christ

would come through Abram's line into the world that the world might be saved through Him.

In Bible Study recently, we heard St Paul appeal to Genesis 12 as he wrote to the Galatians, even citing that specific phrase about Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." And then, Paul went on to tell the Galatians (to explain to these gentiles),

"Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (or, we might hear, "And to your Seed, who is Christ.")

Paul's point was straightforward – we are not saved by works, neither by a meritorious faith of general God-knowledge or knowledge of a unified collection of theological concepts. Faith clings to Christ and trusts solely in Christ, so that what we hear in our Epistle Reading to the Romans is an echo of what Paul had already written to the Galatians, saying: "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith *in Jesus Christ*, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith *in Christ*."

Yes, it all depends on the person of Christ Jesus, even for Abraham, so that Jesus says in John 8, "Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it, and was glad." Abraham was glad because he trusted the One who justifies the ungodly. Isn't that how Paul says it, "To the one who... trusts Him Who justifies the ungodly,

his faith is counted as righteousness.” Abraham’s faith was counted as righteous; his believing heart was not righteous in itself, but it was counted as righteous, for the object of his hope was the *One* (namely Jesus Christ) whose righteous substitution justifies the ungodly heart.

Yes, we heard of that One last week, all of Israel the ungodly reduced to One perfect substitute. We hear the same today: God in this way loved the world, that He gave His only Son (the whole world of ungodly reduced down to one perfect substitute), that whoever believes *in him* ... shall have eternal life”... or, we might say, so that those who with Abraham hope in the long-awaited Christ are truly children of Abraham... their father not according to the flesh, but according to faith *in Christ*.

Now, again, to define this faith correctly, we must recognize that it did not come *from* the heart of Abraham, nor from *our* hearts; but this faith comes from the Holy Spirit... just as our Epistle Reading ends by saying that God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

Ought that not remind us that the Holy Spirit is called the Lord and giver of life (you just confessed in the Nicene Creed) because he calls into existence a faith in Jesus that didn’t naturally exist in the heart. Where, according to the flesh, we were children of wrath and Adam’s condemnation, God has given life and called into existence faith in Jesus Christ by bringing us the new birth of water

and the Spirit. Where the apostle comments on that new birth of water and the Spirit, Jesus teaches and promises it in our text as the corrective to all who want faith to be their own natural ability to see heavenly things and ascend into heavenly philosophy about the things of God. Jesus says, “Unless one is born again (the new birth), he *cannot see* the kingdom of God... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot *enter* the kingdom of God.”

But by water and the Spirit, we are gifted the new birth that enters us into the kingdom of God that the newly born faith can rejoice and grow up in, might recognize its safety in... precisely because God has credited Christ’s righteousness unto us, covered us in it, that we might be *personally and individually* dealt with by God through the Son He sent into the world that the world might be saved through Him.

All of this is tied together in Paul’s beautiful words to Titus: “He saved us, not by works done by us in righteousness, but He saved us by the washing of new birth and renewal, through the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Lord, that being justified by his grace, we might become heirs (the offspring of Abraham) according to the hope of eternal life.”

Indeed, as we said last week, Israel reduced to One clothes us in *His* righteousness and names us heirs of His testament, that all who bear His Name may also be called Israel... that Israel-reduced-to-One now multiplied out into an abundance of offspring, so that

the promise comes to pass: through the One Seed, Abraham has become the father of a multitude among the nations.

And this all can be rejoiced over and hoped in and explained, not by our minds ascending into the heavens and pontificating over theological concepts... Baptism is no concept unto itself... the new testament is no concept unto itself... faith and grace can't be understood just by the terms themselves... eternal life is no concept unto itself... the Holy Spirit as Lord and giver of Life is no concept unto itself. None of these are bullet points or Roman numerals of textbook theology. Rather, all of this can be rejoiced over and hoped in and explained through "the only Son" (it all is attached to him), and *only* through that only Son, whom God sent into the world in human flesh to be lifted up upon the cross... that whoever believes *in Him* shall not have eternal *death* but have eternal *life*.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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March 1, 2026