

# The Festival of the Holy Trinity

Hymns: 244, 245, 237, 246

[ use **The Athanasian Creed** ]

The INTROIT

(Liturgical text; Ps.8:1)

*P: Blessed be the Holy Trinity and the undivided Unity;*

**C: let us give glory to Him because He hath shown His mercy to us.**

*P: O Lord, our Lord;*

**C: how excellent is Thy name in all the earth!**

The COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, who has given unto us, Thy servants, grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity, we beseech Thee that Thou would keep us steadfast in this faith and evermore defend us from all adversities; who liveth and reigneth, ever one God, world without end.

The **FIRST LESSON**

**Ezekiel 18:30-32**

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.

THE GRADUAL

(Song of the Three 29,32-34)

*P: Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who beholdest the deep:*

**C: and who dwellest between the cherubim.**

*P: Blessed art Thou, O Lord, in the firmament of heaven:*

**C: and greatly to be praised forever. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!**

*P: Blessed art Thou, O Lord God of our fathers:*

**C: and greatly to be praised and glorified forever. Hallelujah!**

The **EPISTLE**

**Romans 11:33-36**

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

The SENTENCE for the Season

(Ps. 119:124)

*P: Hallelujah! O Lord, deal with Thy servant according unto Thy mercy and teach me Thy statutes. I am Thy servant, give me understanding:*

**C: that I may know Thy testimonies. Hallelujah!**

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?

Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

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## John 3:1-15 — “What We Know We Speak and What We Behold We Testify”

### INTRODUCTION

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# The Festival of the Holy Trinity

Hymns: 244, 245, 237, 246

John 3:1-15 — “What We Know We Speak and What We Behold We Testify”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you all from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

The appointed Gospel reading for the Festival of the Holy Trinity is John 3:1-15:

**There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.**

**Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**

**Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?**

**Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.**

**Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?**

**Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## INTRODUCTION

The invocation is itself a sermon of the greatest magnitude. On this declaration of God all of our hopes are founded. Into this declaration of God we are baptized, according to the command and commission of the Risen Lord. With this name the Holy Spirit is poured out, and with the Holy Spirit repentance is worked and the full measure of the faith of Jesus is given so that a person is regenerated unto the righteousness of God. In and by the power of this name we are brought to life in the kingdom of God. In connection with this name we are restored to know the image of God and His loving mercy. In the Communion of this name we are made to be witnesses or martyrs of God’s everlasting kingdom of righteousness, blessedness, and holiness, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

## I. BORN FROM ABOVE

With this encounter with Nicodemus, the Lord Jesus obliterates all of the religious notions of mankind. All of the religions of the world are shown to be entirely vacuous by what the Lord Jesus declares to Nicodemus in this text. All of the thoughts, words, and deeds of sinful humans are crushed and shown to be absolutely vacuous by what the Lord Jesus proclaims and reveals through these amazing words. When Jesus is finished speaking, nothing remains to be beheld and embraced except the words revealed by the Triune God who deals with mankind in mercy and love through the preaching of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

**There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.**

**Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**

In coming to Jesus, Nicodemus speaks for all of the sinful human race. He declares what every religion that springs forth from the imagination of men professes. Nicodemus encounters the Son of God in the flesh, the Logos who created all things, and he perceives only a man who performs miracles and teaches morality. Every religion of the world does the same thing with what can be perceived of God apart from being regenerated from above. Be it the foolish delusions of Mohammed, or the insane lies of Joseph Smith, or the demanding ways of the Watchtower, or the philosophy of Confucius, or the nothingness of Buddha, or the philanthropy of humanism and socialism, or any of the other isms of mankind, even the so-called Lutheranism that proclaims the faith of Jesus but seeks unity by degrees, they all perceive and behold Jesus in the same deluded way. He is ultimately treated and embraced as a teacher who worked wonders in the name of God.

Jesus turns to Nicodemus as a representative of all the false beliefs of mankind and kicks him in the groin with these words, **“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** Nicodemus comes as a fraud. He does not confess Jesus openly before the world for who Jesus is. Nicodemus does not even confess Jesus openly as a true prophet and teacher. No, Nicodemus comes under the cover of night, and then addresses Jesus not because of what Jesus teaches, but because of the miraculous signs that he had seen worked by Jesus. To this Jesus responds, **“ Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**

This was a direct slap in the face, even a kick in the groin. With these words the Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that he did not even perceive the kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that he was outside of God’s kingdom, having never been born into God’s kingdom, and therefore did not even recognize the kingdom of God. Such is the way of most who confess to be Christians. For they speak of the kingdom of God, but do not understand that of which they speak.

Nicodemus proceeds to manifest his complete vanity, his complete ignorance of the kingdom of God, when he opens his mouth and says: **“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?”**

Nicodemus is like most Christians in his response. Moses wrote of these things, as did

every other prophet of the LORD God. David confessed these things and wrote of them in the Psalms. Luke records for us the amazing confessions of Simeon and Anna, who by the power of the Holy Spirit knew Jesus for who He is and openly proclaimed Him to all. The Magi knew who Jesus is and traveled great distances at great peril and cost to worship Jesus. But after all of the miracles that Jesus worked among the people of Israel, Nicodemus knows nothing beyond the miracles.

Like most Christians, Nicodemus heard only that Jesus declared that one must be born again. Our translations do not do justice the these words of our Lord. Jesus says: **“Amen! Amen! I say to you, if not one should be born/generated above, not able he to see the kingdom of God.”** The word for born is passive. Along with the adverb, *above*, this declares to us that this is not something that we do, but that it is done unto us, and not from this world, but from heaven. This rebirth or regeneration is from above, worked by the one who is above. It is not something that we choose for ourselves. It is not something that we make happen for ourselves. It is worked by God.

Our text begins with John recording for us the blindness of the false faith of Nicodemus. Jesus proclaims the truth that Moses wrote, and Nicodemus responds with the decision theology of Lutheranism. This is not the common false and deluded theology of most of Christendom, for Nicodemus was not of some sect or alternative denomination. He was as Jesus openly acknowledges, a master of Israel. No, the problem that Nicodemus displays is not false doctrine, but false practice, practice of the right doctrine but without the faith that the Holy Spirit works.

Thus Jesus expounds further.

**Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.**

Jesus tells it to Nicodemus as plainly as it can be told, yet like most of Christendom, Nicodemus views this from the perspective of what the individual must do. However, unlike most Christians, Nicodemus is honest about his ignorance and pleads with the Lord Jesus, saying, **“How can these things be?”**

If only all who profess to be Christians would be honest like Nicodemus. But instead, they boast of their commitment to Christ. They boast of praying the believer’s prayer and of inviting Jesus into their hearts. They boast of making a decision for Christ. They boast of deciding to follow Jesus. They boast of faithfulness while withholding the Sacrament from the children, insisting that they reach an age of reason and understanding before they can be counted as “communicant members” of the congregation. They speak of Baptism, sometimes even as the work of the Holy Spirit, but then act as though the faith given in their baptism were really worked by their own reason and strength. Is it any wonder that people and pastors speak of striving for unity, even saying that only a certain percentage of unity can be hoped to be achieved? Rather than rejoicing in the unity that is the *Una Sancta*, they strive to catch up to or to force unity to come to be, not really believing that it is possible. The Holy Communion is something that is taught as depending upon our human reason, rather than worked by water and Spirit.

## II. WHAT WE KNOW WE SPEAK AND WHAT WE BEHOLD WE TESTIFY

To this the Lord Jesus declares:

**Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.**

Nicodemus acknowledged his vacuous understanding and cried out to Jesus for an explanation. Then he shut up and listened. Jesus addresses him very sternly, yet not with the purpose of condemning him. He simply lays before Nicodemus in very straightforward language the doctrine that Nicodemus and most other Christians miss.

**Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.**

Have you ever asked yourself why this text is appointed for the Festival of the Holy Trinity? Here is the answer. Who is the *we* of which Jesus speaks? Who is the *We* who speak of what they know and testify of what they have seen? Who is the *We* whose testimony Nicodemus and deluded Christians do not receive?

Who has seen the things of heaven? Who has seen the mysteries and understood them? Who has declared these things and preached these things from the very beginning? Do you not perceive that this is why Jesus commanded that we be baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the one name by which God is known? Is this not the reason that we are marked with this name and that we invoke God by this name? Is this not the God whom Moses declares in the opening words of Holy Scripture? Is this not the reason that Elohim, the Hebrew plural for God, is used throughout the Old Testament? Is this not the reason that Jesus proclaims throughout His ministry that the words that He speaks are not His own? Even though Isaiah prophesies of Jesus saying that He shall be called the Everlasting Father, Jesus nevertheless declares of the Holy Trinity saying, **“the Father is greater than I!”** Yes, Immanuel, with us God, is also the name by which Jesus is called, yet He is not God by Himself. He is not the Everlasting Father by Himself. He is not the Wonderful Counselor by Himself. God is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus both the Father and the Spirit appear and proclaim Jesus as the Son of God at His baptism. For they speak together the singular testimony that they have known and seen from eternity.

This is what Jesus teaches Nicodemus. This is what John records for us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Yes, Jesus is **“a teacher come from God”** but not merely a teacher. He is the teacher. He is God. God is Jesus. In Jesus the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily. He does not merely preach and perform miracles. He is the miracle that is preached! He is the Son of God made flesh to tabernacle among us. He is our God and Savior.

## III. THE SON OF MAN WHICH IS IN HEAVEN

**Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven. And**

**as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.**

**“And no one has ascended into heaven except He out of heaven having descended, the Son of Man, the one being in heaven.”**

When Jesus speaks of the Son of Man, He speaks of Himself as the Christ. In so speaking, standing in the presence of Nicodemus, Jesus declares that He is the one being in heaven. First Jesus declares that God is We, and that we speak of what we know and see. Then Jesus returns to speaking in the first person, saying, **“If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?”** When Jesus speaks, He speaks what the Trinity knows and beholds. He speaks first of earthly things, that is, what must be accomplished according to our existence in time and space. It is for this that Jesus took on human form and was born of the Virgin. He came to live as a Man, the Son of Man, to suffer and to die as a Man for Man’s redemption and salvation. But these things are earthly, being done by Jesus as the Son of Man. However, Jesus is the one being in heaven. He is the Son of Man who is in heaven. This He declares to Nicodemus before the crucifixion unto death and before the resurrection and before the ascension. He declares as we do in the Creeds, that He is beyond time and space. He knows what is. He has known it and seen it as the Everlasting Father. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Through Him all things that are came to be. Standing before Nicodemus, speaking the words of God, He also looks upon the creation of the world and creation of the new heavens and the new earth and upon the day of judgment and upon the saints from whom every tear has been wiped away.

But how can Jesus tell Nicodemus or anyone else of heavenly things when we do not hear what He tells us of the earthly things? How can He tell us of the heavenly things and the healing that He has miraculously worked for us when we do not hear Him regarding the earthly things? Jesus warns us that according to our own reason and strength that we do not receive the witness of the Holy Trinity. How can we hear the witness of the Holy Trinity regarding His Holy Communion in heaven when we refuse to hear His witness regarding His Holy Communion on earth? Jesus says that those who are born of water and the Spirit both see and enter the kingdom of heaven. So why then do we practice the excommunication of the children who have been baptized? Have we not heard what God says of His kingdom, His holy communion of the saints? How then can we rightly worship God if we do not believe what He tells us, saying that the worshipers that the Father seeks are those who worship in Spirit and Truth? The Father and the Spirit and the Truth are One! They cannot be known and worshiped except as One in the One true faith of one true Church on earth.

But we do not hear. Instead we make our own noises and our own truth. We say that we can worship God in many denominations. We say that the Gospel can be received in degrees and that as long as a person has enough of the Gospel that person can be saved. We say that people can deny the power of Holy Baptism and still perceive and enter into the kingdom of God. We say that people can obscure the Holy Communion and still be in communion with God and His saints.

From such deluded notions the Lord Jesus calls us to repent. He says, **“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”**

Both of these liftings were commanded by God as the source of salvation from the death that people's false beliefs caused. Consider what Moses records in Numbers 21:4-9,

**And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.**

The way of deliverance that the LORD ordained and the means by which God nurtured and kept His people was not the way that the people found to be acceptable. They spoke against God and His prophet. Notice that in order to save the people He sent fiery serpents to persecute them. Only then did the people say: **“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.”** But notice also the LORD's response. He did not take away the fiery serpents. He did not take away the preaching of the Law. Rather, the LORD commanded that the servant of the Lord lift up the cause of their anguish and misery for them to see, ordaining that as they looked upon their sin and death raised up before them that they would live. Notice that the people no longer rejected the means of grace that the LORD ordained for their salvation but gladly and willingly turned toward it. But in time, they turned God's salvation into their own kind of worship and defined faith according to their own understanding.

The same happens today regarding the lifting up of the Son of Man. Jesus was lifted up to bear our sins and die for us so that we would trust in God's Word and live. But we do like the people of old and turn our worship into something other than what God has decreed. The people of old began to trust in the brass serpent rather than the God who raised up the serpent. Likewise, today people trust in the Cross rather than the God who raised Himself up on the cross. The preaching of cross is the preaching of what God has done for us. It is not the preaching of how we are to draw near to God at the foot of the cross, but that we are to draw near to God through the means of grace by which the benefits that Christ purchased for us on the cross might be received from Him in His body. How often do we do like the people of old and speak against God who gives us such common things as water and bread and wine for our salvation? How often do we invent our own forms of worship, looking upon our own acts of believing and choosing and praying as though these were the things by which we see and enter into God's kingdom?

God takes the things that we count as nothing and uses them in order to show us that He is the one by whom our salvation is worked. He comes to us through these means, means that can be found anywhere, things that God Himself makes available to us. He has declared it to be so. Do we hear Him? Do we believe that the Son of Man who stood before Nicodemus in the flesh and declared that He is the one being in heaven, is also coming to us through the means of grace declaring to us that as the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Father that He is the

one being with us in His body and blood?

#### CONCLUSION

Why does God do this? Why does God hold our smallness before us and bring us to our knees? Why does God tell us to confess our sins and our poor miserable condition even after He has brought us into His kingdom and joined into His Holy Communion? He does this because He knows that on our own we will begin to imagine ourselves to be bigger than we are and more knowledgeable than we are. He knows that we will begin to elevate our efforts above His means of grace. He knows that we will treat our worship and our prayers and our devotion and our witness as important and begin to trust in these things. He knows that we are powerless to believe in Him according to our own reason and strength. He knows that we need to hear Him rather than to make ourselves heard. He knows how we love the sound of our own voices and how we imagine that we need to be witnesses, when what we need is to hear the sound of His voice and to listen to His witness. He knows that repentance is something that He alone can work in us. Therefore He continually calls us to the regeneration of water and Spirit as the means by which we perceive and enter the kingdom of God. Having restored the faith that we so quickly turn away from He then calls us in faith to partake of His body and blood of His Holy Communion and forgiveness and life. By these means He strips away every cause for doubt. By these means He directs us away from our own efforts and our own understanding and our own attempts at believing, so that we perceive what He has done and continues to do and we understand that His grace is truly sufficient for us and we truly believe according to the faith that He works in us. Then we truly live as His dear children and trust in Him as our dear Father in all things. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.