

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 at Victory of the Lamb on Titus 3:3-7.

**Series: The Most Important Day**  
**Series: A Day to Claim God's Promises**

**“Baptism Brings Us Blessings Because God's the One at Work”**

The title of this new series is The Most Important Day. And that sort of begs the question, doesn't it? What's the most important day of *your* life? If you're sitting next to your spouse, you might consider this as your cue to lean over and whisper... “The day I met you”...or “The day we got married.” Or maybe it was the day you get accepted into college, or the day you swore an oath to defend and protect this country, or the day you met your childhood hero. Or perhaps you're thinking about something a little different—like the day when you quit smoking, gave up a bad relationship, or made a key decision to stop doing something that changed the course of your life. The day I received a divine Call upon graduation of the Seminary to move my family to Franklin to start this church was a pretty big day for me. Vicar Caleb's call day is coming up this month. It's going to be pretty important for him. What's the most important day of your life? If you're struggling to pin it down to just one day, you're in good company. Mark Train, the great American author, once said, “The most two most important days in a person's life are the day that you're born, and the day you figure out why.”

In a way we're going to talk about both those things in this series, including the why, because what God wants to teach us is that even more important than the day of your birth...is the day of your spiritual rebirth. The Most Important Day...is your “Rebirthday”! And if that sounds a little odd at first, don't worry. You're not alone. A long time ago a man named Nicodemus once thought so too.

Now you heard me read the story earlier from John 3. But let me retell it. There was a man named Nicodemus. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin—one of the 70 religious leaders whose job was to oversee religious life in Israel. And so Nicodemus came to talk with Jesus one day, actually one night, because he didn't want his Sanhedrin friends to find out that he was going to go hang out with Jesus. You see as a group they were pretty ticked off at Jesus. They were angry because notoriously bad people, irreligious people, rotten scoundrels like tax collectors were repenting of their sins and going out and being baptized to have their sins washed away. So the Jewish religious leaders felt their authority slipping away as the crowds of people getting baptized kept growing. They felt something needed to be done. There was a growing sentiment among the Sanhedrin that the solution was that Jesus perhaps needed to be done away with.

But Nicodemus wasn't so sure. He felt at least Jesus had earned the right to be heard. After all, Nicodemus had heard the stories. Perhaps he had even witnessed some of the miracles himself. He couldn't deny them. As an aside it was interesting to me if you've seen the Son of God movie that it portrayed Nicodemus in this way—as if Nicodemus was actually present on different occasions in Jesus' ministry to witness a miracle or to see Jesus calling a tax collector to come follow him. It's quite possible Nicodemus was there for some of these events but we don't know.

At any rate Nicodemus comes to Jesus to have a chat—man to man. Little does he know that this was going to be one of the most important conversations of his life. So he comes to Jesus and gets straight to the point. **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”** And you remember what Jesus says?

**“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”** In other words, “No one, Nicodemus, absolutely no one, not even you, can go to heaven unless they’re born again.” Are you following Jesus here? Nicodemus wasn’t. So how did Nicodemus respond? He’s puzzled. “Born again? I’m supposed to be reborn? What is that even supposed to mean? I’m not sure my mother is going to be ok with that. I mean I’m a grown man!” You see this didn’t make sense to Nicodemus at first. Nicodemus wasn’t thinking about this in spiritual terms because like most people today he thought spiritually he was doing just fine on his own without really needing Jesus. The Jewish religious leaders found their source of hope in the fact that they were basically good people, better than others at least outwardly in terms of how well they obeyed God’s laws, especially when compared to the kind of people who were going out to get baptized. You ever do that...try and feel better about yourself by compare yourself to others?

So Jesus goes on... **“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”** Did you catch it, friends? What does it mean to be born again? Jesus says it means to be born of water and the Spirit. It’s like Jesus is saying, “Nicodemus, when I say you must be born again, I’m not talking about physically being reborn—as miraculous as that would have to be. I’m talking about something that would have to be even more miraculous, something so much more important that unless it happens you cannot enter heaven. I’m talking about a spiritual rebirth that takes place through water and the Spirit!”

And why? Because Jesus explains, **“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”** You get what Jesus is saying? You must be born again because flesh gives birth to flesh. In other words all of us, myself included, are born into this world with a problem. From our parents we inherited much more than just their physical DNA and perhaps a few interesting character traits and physical characteristics. We also inherited from our parents a sinful nature. **Flesh gives birth to flesh.** In other words sinful parents give birth to sinful babies. This is why David in the Old Testament says, **“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me”** (Psalm 51:5). There’s no figurative language here. This is no metaphor. He’s admitting truthfully and transparently, “Folks, I have a sin problem...and it’s deeper than just the fact that I’ve done some really bad things in life that I feel bad about and can’t undo. It’s the very fact that by nature I am a sinner and that this inherited sin itself disqualifies me from ever seeing the kingdom of God.”

Friends, do you realize...the same is true for you and me. By nature we’re all in the same boat. We are born physically alive but spiritually dead which means we lack the ability to do anything about it. And that’s why Jesus says if anything is to be done at all, it’s going to have to be the work of God. **“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”** Nicodemus was just starting to realize what Jesus was getting at. And so will we as we turn our attention now to one of my favorite passages in the New Testament found in Titus 3:3-7:

<sup>3</sup>**At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.** Remember the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The Pharisees thought they were basically good people, better than most and therefore deserving of good things from God...or at least that they weren’t as bad in comparison to what others had done. Isn’t there that same temptation for us who are here today in church?

But God’s Word is pretty clear on this: <sup>3</sup>**At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one**

**another.** Maybe for some of you the thoughts and feelings of this are still pretty fresh. You can remember what life was like before you became a Christian and it makes you shudder to think about it. There are things you've done that you're not sure you'll ever be able to forget. And yet if we're honest there's still that sinful nature part of all us that only wants to pursue that which we think will make us happy, right? The instant gratification part of us which will do almost anything so long as it feels good, right? If it helps us get what we want, we'll say almost anything no matter how mean spirited or vicious. If it helps us get what we think will make us happy, we'll do almost anything and find ways to rationalize it. Sometimes the thought that other people have what we want can drive us to do things that only bring about our own demise.

**<sup>4</sup>But [sometimes "but" is the greatest word in the Bible!] when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup>he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup>whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup>so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.**

That sound great, doesn't it!? Let me ask you a question. How much credit can you take for the fact that you were physically born as a baby? Pretty much zilch, nada, none, right? In fact if your mother were here and she heard you trying to say, "Yep, I made it easy on her" or "That was all me" you might need to practice confession and absolution on the way out! Because by definition you *were born*. There's nothing more passive than being born. It's something that happens to you. They don't call it "labor and delivery" because of all the labor that the baby does to make it happen, right!?

And that was you and me also in terms of our relationship with God until we are born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. How many of you regularly celebrate your "rebirthday"? I'm guessing most of you probably have a party, maybe a cake and a few presents, for your physical birthday. But what about your rebirthday? And you know what I'm talking about, right? The day you were baptized and the Holy Spirit planted faith in your heart! Remember what Jesus told Nicodemus, **"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."** Well here's the amazingly good news. The very thing which Jesus says must happen as a prerequisite for entering heaven, being born again, is the very thing that God himself promises to give through baptism! Do you see why Baptism brings us blessings? Baptism brings us blessings because God's the one at work through the water used in connection with God's powerful Word. So God's the one who creates this new life, this spiritual rebirth. We are completely passive. We are the ones who are born again. To God belongs the glory!

Jesus said, **"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."** But then when hear baptism described as a **"washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."** What is baptism? It's a bath, a washing, that brings about our spiritual rebirth.

I was born on March 20, 1980 in Huntsville Alabama. I was apparently destined to love basketball because I was born during March Madness. My dad actually got to watch a game on a TV in the lobby as my mom was giving birth to me (Back in those days they didn't let dads in the delivery room. Not sure my dad would've chosen to be in there anyway with the game being on!) But then on March 30, on Palm Sunday, I was born again as my pastor dad poured water over my little forehead and said "Benjamin James Kuerth" I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And just like I was born again and the seed of

faith was worked in my heart. Truly, I had as little to do that with that as I did with being physically born. And I'm ok with that. Because that's God's point in this whole Titus passage. How can Baptism bring us such great blessings—like forgiveness of all our sins, including inherited sin, so that now we can be called heirs of heaven with an eternal inheritance stored up for us? Is it because of the magic water itself? Because of the holy qualities of the person pouring the water? Because of something so special in me?

No! Baptism brings great blessings because God's the one at work through baptism. Let me read this again: **<sup>4</sup>But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup>he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup>whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup>so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.**

Why would God promise us these blessings? Because he is kind and loving. Because he is compassionate and merciful. Because God cares. He cares so much for all of us including little children. He's not some dispassionate deity who stands on the sidelines on the universe and isn't willing to lift a finger for us. No friends, God has come to help his people. This he did when Jesus Christ appeared in this world as one of us, God with us, God's own Son come to help us. Everything Jesus did, he did for us, because we couldn't do it for ourselves. And all that Jesus accomplished for us through his death on the cross and his victory over death on Easter...all the blessings that he won and which we receive by faith...the Holy Spirit makes ours through baptism—the forgiveness of our sins, our clear conscience, and an eternal inheritance in heaven.

Friends, when's your *rebirth*day? Do you know? I challenge you to find out when you were baptized. Find out the day. Remember your *rebirth*day and reclaim its blessings. On the other hand if you know you haven't been baptized, do not despair! Here's my offer. I have a baptism class today noon-1pm and a Baptism Sunday on May 15<sup>th</sup>. Come to the class today at noon, and if you can't...let's meet up in the next two weeks, we'll talk about Baptism, and see if the 15<sup>th</sup> works for you to get baptized. We can always pick a different day. If you've been putting off baptism for sentimental reasons, you may consider scheduling sooner for spiritual reasons.

And by the way, because Baptism is God's Work...the blessings are guaranteed by God's grace and not our obedience. So if you've been baptized before, whether at another Christian church or as a child, you don't need to be rebaptized even if you're just now starting to come to church. Or if the person who baptized you turned out to be a scoundrel, you don't have to be rebaptized then either. Because Baptism is God's Work...the power isn't in the person who does the baptizing or in the water itself. The power comes from God's Word...and because baptism is God's work the blessings are beyond breaking. So remember your *rebirth*day and reclaim today the promises God makes to us through baptism: faith, forgiveness, and an eternal inheritance. Amen.

### **Take Home and Apply**

**Think:** How much credit can you take for being born? None. So how much credit can you take for being reborn through holy baptism? Nada. And that's why the promises of baptism are so comforting. Baptism gives us blessings because God's the one at work!

**Share:** “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:4-5).

**Challenge:** When was your “rebirthday?” Find out. Reclaim the promises God made to you at your baptism. If you haven’t been baptized, ask Pastor Ben about his baptism class to learn how you can be baptized.