

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Abraham was a man of faith. That is evident from the Old Testament lesson. Out of the blue, the Lord spoke to Moses and told him to pick up and move, where, Abraham knew not. The Lord was going to let him know when he got there. Now, this was told to Abraham with a promise, this is true. *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* Still, it wasn't much to go on, and yet, Abraham went! That was a demonstration of his faith, and, of course, the Lord was faithful. He fulfilled His promise...

Mostly, for Abraham remained childless. *“Behold, the word of the LORD came to him: ‘... your very own son shall be your heir.’ And [the Lord] brought [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”* (Gen. 15:4-5). It took a while yet, and Abraham went astray with Sarah's maidservant, but the Lord was faithful. He fulfilled this promise, too. And as St. Paul echoed Moses, *“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”* Abraham was a man of faith.

Nor was this faith untested. You know that story, too. Abraham was instructed to take his son Isaac, his only son, the son of promise, up the mountain, and there sacrifice him. Abraham, this man of faith, did as the Lord instructed. He took his son Isaac up the mountain, built the altar, and laid Isaac upon it, to slaughter him there as a burn offering. Only the hand of the Lord stayed the fatal blow. Moreover, the Lord Himself provided the substitute: a lamb for the sacrifice.

The Lord called down from heaven: *“By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you”* (Gen. 22:16-17), and He repeated His promises to faithful Abraham. But lest we misunderstand, St. Paul instructs us, *“the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”* Remember what he had proclaimed earlier, that *“by works of the law no human being [not even Abraham] will be justified in [God's] sight”* (Rom. 3:20). Abraham was a man of faith, and Abraham's heirs are people of faith, *“For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise”* (Gal. 3:18).

Skip ahead some 2,000+ years, and Jesus, THE offspring of the promise, is confronted by a man who would have called himself an offspring of Abraham, a Jewish leader, a Pharisee, Nicodemus. We don't really know why he came to see Jesus; we only know that it was under the cover of darkness, for Nicodemus was probably frightened, after all Jesus had already overturned the moneychangers' tables and had spoken of destroying the temple.

Nicodemus offered Jesus a compliment: *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”*

Jesus’ answer seems unrelated, but knowing Jesus, it’s not. The Pharisees were mired in the law, and in fences around the law. The Pharisees were shackled by the opinions of this Rabbi and that Rabbi. But Jesus was doing things and teaching things like no other, like one who exuded authority, commanding unclean spirits, and they obeying Him (Mark 1:27)! He must surely be from God, Nicodemus said. True, but Jesus will bear witness to even more: He not only is from God; He is the only Son of God, the One *“descended from heaven, [even] the Son of Man.”*

Therefore, Jesus said to Nicodemus, *“unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* Confused Nicodemus wondered about Jesus’ enigmatic saying, but Jesus was not talking about being born physically again. No, this birth is *“from above”* as that Greek word *ἄνωθεν* is perhaps better translated. Jesus was talking about being *“born of water and the Spirit.”* This is the language of baptism and faith. Jesus was calling Nicodemus to father Abraham’s faith. His words were about being *“baptized into Christ”* (Gal. 3:27), and becoming *“sons of God, through faith”* (Gal. 3:26), and becoming Abraham’s true offspring, *“heirs according to promise”* (Gal. 3:29).

Jesus was calling Nicodemus to trust in God who Himself **causes** *“us to be **born again** to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an **inheritance** that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who **by God’s power** are being guarded through **faith** for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time”* (1 Pet. 1:3-5). Being born again happens from above; it is God’s doing.

I can’t resist telling this story. You may have heard it before; I’ve told it often enough, especially in Adult Catechesis.

You know that Marge and I spent quite a bit time in the South, especially Arkansas and Missouri, but I also in Oklahoma and Georgia. One thing the Baptists and Church of Christ folks down there make a big deal about is being born again. You’ll see it on billboards when driving: John 3:3 *“You must be born again.”*

Well, one day, up here in Fort Wayne, Marge and I were in the truck (it was my old red GMC), and as we were coming up to a stoplight in the left turn lane, there was a young man in the concrete median, holding a sign, *“John 3:3 “You must be born again.”* I had never seen that in Fort Wayne, and the truth is, I couldn’t resist it either, having encountered dozens of these while in the South. We were stopped, so I rolled down my window. *“Very good,”* I said, pointing to the sign. You can’t argue, after all, with Jesus’ words. But then I asked, *“Do you know how that happens? How is one ‘born again’?”*

Now, mind you, as I’m asking this, Marge is sliding down onto the

floorboard. I'm sure she told me, "Don't do it," but I couldn't resist.

"Sure," the young man answered. "You just surrender yourself and invite Jesus into your heart."

"Oh really?" I responded. "Is that how Jesus answered Nicodemus. Read John 3:5 for His answer." The light turned green, I drove off, and Marge picked herself up off the floorboard.

You hear the problem. No! Your being born again is no more your doing than your first birth was. You were the object of your birth, not the cause. You were given birth into this world by your mother and father, and you are given birth into the kingdom by God the Father into the Son through the Holy Spirit in the waters of Holy Baptism. Or as Peter said, "*God the Father ... caused [you] to be born again.*"

And in that rebirth, the Spirit also gives faith as it pleases God, for this, too, "*is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*" (Eph. 2:8), or as Luther wrote: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts" (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Third Article).

Moreover, this is the faith into which you are reborn, for baptism itself is into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, your faith, like Abraham's, is a faith in the only Son of God, a faith in the One "*whom God put forward as [an atoning sacrifice] by his blood,*" for when faithful Abraham put forth his only son as a sacrifice, he didn't just see his son being offered up; he saw the day of Jesus' glorification on the cross and was glad (John 8:56). Yes, Abraham believed God in the promise of his son, and believed God as he was told to sacrifice his son; so are we called to believe in the God who gave the world His only Son, who for us sacrificed this Son, not staying His own hand, but sacrificing Him unto death by lifting Him up on the pole of a cross. Baptism and faith in Christ crucified "*that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.*" For God sent His Son "*in order that the world might be saved through him.*" "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved*" (Mark 16:16).

In His commentary, Bill Weinrich connects all this up nicely — baptism and faith, salvation and Christ crucified: "The new life of the Spirit, given and received in Baptism, will be a life in union with, and not apart from the exaltation of the Son of Man in his death. The passion of Jesus, as the locus of exaltation and divine royalty, is the content and form of the eternal life given by the Spirit." (*Concordia Commentary: John 1:1-7:1*, 404).

May we in faith, with Abraham, also rejoice in the life-giving gifts of God.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.