

Born of Water and the Spirit

John 3

What We Found

A ruler of the Jews came to Jesus by night with a compliment, and Jesus answered with a demolition: unless one is born from above, of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Nicodemus should have known, and we found out why: Ezekiel 36 already promised clean water sprinkled on God's people and a new spirit put within them, water and spirit together in one act of new covenant cleansing. The early Church heard Baptism in this verse from the beginning, and we tested that reading honestly against the text itself: the grammar names one birth, not two; the whole surrounding chapter is soaked in baptizing; and the Fathers overwhelmingly read it exactly so. We also held on to the Church's careful balance: God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments (CCC 1257).

Then we followed Jesus into the wilderness of Numbers 21, where the remedy for the snake-bitten was an image of the affliction itself, lifted on a pole, healing everyone who looked at it. As Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that is the sentence John 3:16 grows out of. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. And the Baptist gave us his farewell in eight words that contain the whole spiritual life: he must increase, but I must decrease. He called Jesus the bridegroom. We are still holding the question he left us: then who is the bride?

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61

Writing around the year 155, Justin describes for the Roman emperor how Christians are made: those who believe are brought where there is water and are washed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for Christ said, unless you are born again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Within living memory of the apostles, the Church already read this verse as the charter of Baptism.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 2 (On Baptism)

Instructing the newly baptized in the week after Easter, Cyril unfolds what had just happened to them in the font: the saving water was at once their grave and their mother (*Mystagogical Catechesis* 2.4). In his earlier pre-baptismal instruction on Baptism he had already insisted on both halves of the sentence: neither water alone without the Spirit, nor the Spirit alone without water. They descend as into a grave and come up born into new life.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, on chapter 3

What the womb is to the child, the water is to the believer. In the beginning the Spirit hovered over the waters and creation was born; now the Spirit moves over the font and the new creation is born. Nicodemus joked about entering the womb a second time; Chrysostom answers that God has in fact

provided a second womb.

Live It This Week

- **Find your date.** Track down the date of your baptism this week, ask a parent, find the certificate, call the parish. Write it somewhere permanent. You keep the anniversary of your first birth every year; you now have your second one.
- **Bless yourself like you mean it.** Every time you take holy water entering a church this week, slow down. That gesture recalls Ezekiel 36 and your own Baptism: clean water, and a renewed spirit. Let it be a two-second act of remembering who you are.
- **One decrease.** Choose one habit of self-promotion, steering conversations to yourself, checking who noticed, quietly keeping score, and fast from it for seven days, in honor of the friend of the bridegroom.

Memory Verse

John 3:16 (RSV2CE)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Before Next Session

Read John 4. Session 5: Living Water. Keep your sign tally going, and keep your guess sealed.

Catechism References

CCC 458, 1215, 1225, 1257-1261.