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Holy Trinity
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John 3:1-17
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“For God so loved the world, the He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Next week we will have Vacation Bible School. It’ll be a wonderful time for the children to have some fun and learn about Jesus. It isn’t something I grew up with—in fact, the first time I heard about it, I wasn’t sure I wanted to be involved—but it is something I’ve grown to appreciate thoroughly. As I said, Vacation Bible School will be a wonderful time for the children to have some fun and learn about Jesus.

I first learned the importance of Vacation Bible School when I was on vicarage at Trinity Lutheran Church in Norman, Oklahoma. All year I had talked with a lady named Mary Beth Studebaker. Mary Beth was a dour woman, rarely ever smiling, rarely ever saying anything good about much of anything. She didn’t go around complaining or saying bad things, mind you. She just didn’t seem to have anything nice to say... so she didn’t say anything at all. But Mary Beth got really excited when it came time for Vacation Bible School. A smile appeared on her face and a spring showed up in her step.

You see, it was through Vacation Bible School that Mary Beth came to know Jesus. Her parents didn’t go to church except for the occasional wedding or funeral or special event. They would’ve said that they didn’t have anything against religion, but they just didn’t have much use for it either. So, when Mary Beth was a child (in the 1930s), she was invited by a friend to Vacation Bible School. There she learned about her sin. There she learned about her Savior from that sin. There she learned that God made her and loves her and gave Himself for her. There, at Vacation Bible School, Mary Beth came to faith. There, at Vacation Bible School, Mary Beth was, as our reading this morning says, “born again.”

And that’s what Vacation Bible School with its games and lessons and songs and hoopin’ and hollerin’ is all about: giving the Gospel to young hearts and minds. It’s about creating and strengthening faith in Jesus. It’s about fulfilling Jesus’ command to teach all peoples to observe all that He has told us. It’s about sharing that love of Jesus with our children; and they in turn sharing God’s love with everyone else.

The verse for Vacation Bible School will be 2 Corinthians 1:20—

For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory.

Incorporating the theme of a ride at a water park like Cedar Point in Sandusky, all the lessons we'll learn will have to do with God's promise of life. It's really just a device to talk about Holy Baptism and all the biblical types that point to God's gracious working through water and the Word. As it says in our Small Catechism:

What benefits does Baptism give? It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.

Jesus talks to Nicodemus about this very thing. Jesus declares that we must be “born again” if we want to see the kingdom of God. “Born again” isn't all that tricky, though it can be quite confusing, as it was for Nicodemus. He wondered how we could enter into our mother's womb a second time. Problem with Nicodemus's question is all about who's doing the action. “Can [a man] enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” How do any of us enter our mother's womb the first time? Did we do anything? Did we decide to be born? Were we given any power or choice? No, of course not. Likewise, so it is with coming to faith. We don't do anything. Rather it's the Holy Spirit that calls us, moves us, and brings us to the faith. He does all the work.

And God is still working. God reaches out to others through us. God definitely worked through Mary Beth Studebaker's childhood friend. He works in the parents to bring their child to the baptismal font. God works in the child that brings his or her friend to Vacation Bible School. God works in every one of us when we speak of His love. And through the parents and the friends and you, God gives us the most precious gift of all—faith in Jesus.

Faith in Jesus is the most precious gift of all for in it we have life and salvation. As Jesus tells us, He didn't come to condemn the people in this world, but He came to save them. And why would God do such a thing? Jesus tells us that it's because the Father loves us. He loves us by giving His only Son Jesus. He loves us by allowing His Son to die on the cross. He loves us by raising Jesus from the dead. He loves us by raising Jesus to His right hand. He loves us by sending His Holy Spirit. He loves us by calling us with the Gospel.

And the Gospel is quite simply: *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that*

whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

We will teach this Gospel—the only Gospel—to our children at Vacation Bible School. Each evening they will learn a very important idea. We’ll begin with the profound truth that “God is with us.” When Moses was sent to go before Pharaoh and make the LORD’s demand, “Let My people go so that they may worship Me,” he was scared. But God promised, “I will be with you,” just as He had been with baby Moses in the Nile. “God is with us.” In fact, Jesus is called Immanuel, which means “God with us.” Out of His abundant love, God gave His Son, sending Jesus to us as one of us. He came to His own, including Nicodemus. He came to you in the front, joining Himself to you. What’s more, He continues to come to you in His preaching and His sacred meal. “God is with us.” Yes, He is.

And so we will teach the children what this means for them—and for us—with “God gives us life.” God led His people under another Jesus—that is, Joshua, which is the Hebrew version of the name Jesus—into the Promised Land by parting the Jordan River. The Israelites were given a land flowing with milk and honey. So Jesus, the greater Jesus, the only Son of the Father, promises us a great Promised Land. And this is the promise that He made to Nicodemus: whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. In Baptism, God creates faith—if faith doesn’t already exist—and bestows eternal life—life that faith receives. In Baptism, therefore, “God gives us life.” Yes, He does.

But we know that people break their promises. We have. We will again. We aren’t always faithful. So we will teach the children that God isn’t like us in that way. We will teach that “God is faithful” even when we are faithless. So they’ll learn about the unbelieving Naaman whom God healed in the Jordan River. Through His prophet Elisha, God promised to heal Naaman. Even though Naaman doubted, even though he scoffed at God’s promise, God was faithful in keeping the promise spoken by the prophet. Naaman was healed. “God is faithful.” And so when God promises us life and salvation in the Son whom He’s given for us and that He sends His Spirit to us in Baptism and we are “born again,” we know He’ll keep His Word. “God is faithful.” Yes, He is.

Even when we have faith, things can get pretty rough. God promises eternal life. He doesn’t promise for this life to be easy or without problems. So we’ll teach the children the story about Apostle Paul and when he was shipwrecked. Even when things were at their darkest, Paul had God’s promise to give him hope. “God gives hope.” That’s what Jesus was

for Nicodemus, too. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the darkness. Nicodemus was both afraid what others might think and also hopeful for Jesus to be the Messiah. The hope Jesus offered was greater than Nicodemus's fears. The hope Jesus gives overcomes the darkness of our fears. And so Nicodemus, as we read at the end of John's Gospel account, openly displayed his love by carrying for Jesus' crucified body. "God gives hope" to us, too. Holy Baptism is the seal of guarantee that we will have what He's promised—eternal life. "God gives hope." Yes, He does.

All these promises of God find their Yes in Jesus because "Jesus is our Savior." Yes, He is. All the ways God used water point us to the One who saves us by the waters of Holy Baptism. How can water do such great things? As our Small Catechism answers:

Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God's word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit.

That's what Jesus promised Nicodemus in their late-night conversation. That's what Jesus has promised you and promises for you in Holy Baptism. Just as Jesus went into the water and was baptized by His cousin John, He puts His Word of promise in those waters and Baptism then gives just what He promises: eternal life. Indeed, "Jesus is our Savior." All the promises of God find their Yes in Him. "Jesus is our Savior." Yes, He is.

So, as you can see, Vacation Bible School this year will be fantastic! Send your children. Invite their friends' parents to do the same. Offer them transportation. Sign up to help. We'll have hoopin' and hollerin'. We'll have games and lessons and songs. We'll have snacks and crafts. But, most importantly, we'll have God's promises and the One whom is Yes to all of those promises. We have Jesus, and we'll give Jesus to our children—just as He's been given to countless children, children like Mary Beth Studebaker, over the decades at Vacation Bible School—so that they might believe, and believing have eternal life.

In Jesus' name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.