

We live in a world, a reality, that is full of spiritual truth. These are truths that we cannot see, that we cannot measure, that sometimes we can't even comprehend. Take, for example, the whole spiritual realm. What is an angel, and how many of them can dance on the head of a pin? How bright is the splendor of heaven? How hot are the fires of hell? You can't answer these questions, or make measurements of these things.

Or consider the existence of the soul. Only the most hardened of atheists will deny that there is a component to a person that goes beyond flesh and blood. There is something more to us than just our bodies, and we intuitively know this, even though we can't put whatever it is on a scale and weigh it or run it through an MRI and see it.

The greatest spiritual truth is ultimately God Himself. He is spirit, not made of physical stuff, though all things come from Him. His power is beyond our ability to comprehend or put into words. His knowledge is perfect, including everything from the number and position of every star in the cosmos to the count of every hair of your head – and every desire of your heart. His goodness is absolute – complete perfection, without any flaw, error, or room for improvement. His glory is so great that we cannot – as we are now – look on Him and live.

As the Creator of all that is, His impression, His fingerprints, if you will, are throughout His creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork,” as David confesses in the Psalms. In the hearts of men there remains the conviction that He is there.

Even among pagan peoples lost in darkness, there remains a conviction that there is a God, though they have warped and twisted the truth of who He is to fit their own ideas and sins. Indeed, it is our sin that keeps us from seeing the full glory of God, our sin that separates us from Him and places us in spiritual darkness.

Yet as the Father who is perfect in power and knowledge and goodness, He is also perfect in love, and it grieves Him to see those whom He made to dwell with Him in peace and joy be separated from Him. And so, as we know from the beloved verse that was in our Gospel reading this morning, “He sent His only-begotten Son.”

This was an incredible, awesome event, for so many reasons. One of the greatest is that, in sending the Son, the Father broke that barrier between heaven and earth, between the spiritual and the material. In the Incarnation, the infinite God became a finite Man, the fullness of Deity dwelling in a mortal body – and at the same time not losing anything from His infinite, divine nature.

In Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect man, the unseeable God could be seen. And not just seen, but held, and swaddled, and rocked... and grasped, and walked alongside of, and dined with... and mocked, and beaten, and crucified. In a great mystery, the immortal God, the source of life itself, died.

And in another great mystery, a dead Man came back to life, never to die again! Not just won't die; cannot die. He is a Man whom the grave cannot hold, as St. Peter preached at Pentecost. He is the

firstfruits of the grave, the firstborn from the dead. He is the mortal who has put on immortality. He is the Lamb who was slain but now reigns from the throne of heaven forever.

And He has done all of this out of love for you! “For God so loved the world...” and that includes you!

It seems too good to be true, doesn't it? We might sit back with Nicodemus and wonder, “How can these things be?” How can the almighty Father send the eternal, only-begotten Son from heaven to earth for me? This is where we experience the glory and love and goodness of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Holy Spirit. It is through Him that we believe.

He is the one who comes to us and, through the hearing and preaching of the Word, convicts us of our sins and the guilt they have incurred against the holy God. He is the one who works repentance in us, as the Scriptures clearly teach, leading us to sorrow over our sins and ask God to be merciful to us as sinners.

The Holy Spirit is then also the one who grants us forgiveness and peace through the words of absolution. Remember, it was God the Son who breathed on His disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”

It is the Spirit who lets you believe that the words and promises of God are for you. It is the Spirit who causes you to believe that Jesus hung on the cross to take away your sins and rose again to show you what awaits you after you die. It is the Spirit who gives you hope, not in the world's sense of wishful thinking, but in the heavenly sense of confidence grounded in God Himself.

It is the Spirit's work to do this, because we are certainly not capable of it ourselves. From our very conception, our hearts are corrupted by sin, turned against God. We need new hearts, but we cannot get them ourselves. As Jesus pointed out to Nicodemus, “That which is born of flesh is flesh.” The best efforts of sinful men will always be corrupted by sin.

But, as Jesus also said, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” It is God the Holy Spirit who comes and gives us new, spiritual hearts that truly do delight in God and cling to Him. This is what happens when a person is baptized, or as Jesus puts it, “is born of water and the Spirit.” In those waters, a very earthly element, a heavenly event takes place as the Spirit conceives or regenerates spirit in the heart of the baptized.

How does this work? It is beyond our understanding in this life. “The wind (or better translated, Spirit) blows where He wishes, and you hear His voice, but you do not know where He comes from or where He goes.” It is a mystery, but it is true all the same. God grants new, spiritual hearts and eternal life through water and His word because He wants to, and He's God, so He can do as He pleases.

You and I simply get to rejoice in this incredible gift, that we can bind the name of the Triune God Himself – as we sang in our hymn of the day – to ourselves, not as a mere memory or good-luck charm, but as the reality that God has joined us to Himself and caused us to be reborn as children in His heavenly household.

It is the work of the God the Holy Trinity to take these glorious, heavenly truths and make them earthly realities for us and in us. The Father creates the world for us, gives His Son for us, grants us a place in His house and in His family. The Son is the One through whom all things were made, who became man for us and for our salvation, who has gone ahead to prepare a place for us in the Father's house. The Spirit breathed life into the first man, recreates us and gives new life, and is our Comforter and Helper and Advocate, dwelling in our hearts, making our bodies His temple.

Each person of the Trinity is at work to create, redeem, and sanctify God's people. None can be separated, dismissed, or diminished without losing the one true God. But believing in this truth of who God has revealed Himself to be, we have comfort, hope, and peace that go far beyond our understanding and which will last forever.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.