

Where Are We Coming From?

John 3:1-10 *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”*

John 17:6-19 *They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world... As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*

There is a story making the rounds of spiritual discussions these days, particularly about children and their relationship with God. It goes something like this: A young girl anxiously asked her parents when her newborn brother would be old enough to talk. Sensing their daughter’s urgency about the matter, they asked why she wanted to know. She responded: “Because I am beginning to forget.”

Forget what? Forget her, and our, relationship with God. Losing touch. Drifting away from what we were all born with—an immediate and intimate relationship with the very Source of our Being. Maria Montessori knew this about children. Sophia Cavalletti, who developed worship for children based on Montessori’s insights and experience, knew this, that children already have a close relationship with God. Jesus said that children are closer to the kingdom of God than we are. If we don’t become like them, we can’t enter that kingdom, that realm of life as God made it to be.

As we grow older, the conditioning of society, and often religion itself, tends to erode in us that original closeness to God. We have to be born again, said Jesus. That’s a central theme of John’s gospel. Nicodemus comes to see Jesus in the dead of night. Nicodemus is in the dark. Nicodemus is a leader of the Pharisees. He knows a lot of stuff. He’s been around religion for a long time. Now he doesn’t seem to know exactly what he is looking for, but he just seems drawn to Jesus, to the Light. He makes a fumbling statement about the great things Jesus is doing and that Jesus must be very close to God. Jesus ignores this and goes right to the heart of the matter: We need to be born again, born anew, born from above—the Greek words here mean all of those things.

There is a Buddhist story that is similar. A monk came to see the Buddha, who was old and near death. The Buddha’s assistant, trying to protect his master, did not want to let the man in, but the Buddha compassionately invited him in. The monk asked the Buddha something like this: World Honored One, are the teachers of the other spiritual communities enlightened? The Buddha responded: What does it matter whether they are enlightened or not? What matters is whether you are waking up. What matters is you and your life and what you are doing with it. Thich Nhat

Hanh comments on this story that when you get the chance to ask a spiritual teacher a question, ask a question that can change your life. The rest is a waste of time. Jesus cut to the most important thing. Let’s drop the formalities and flattery. Let’s not talk in generalities or about other people or the world. Let’s talk about you, Nicodemus, your life and who you really are.

When Jesus talks about being born again, or from above, he means getting back to the Source, back to where we came from. It means reawakening to who we really are after we’ve been wandering around lost in this world.

The story of Nicodemus is an important backdrop for Jesus’ prayer for his disciples. He is about to die and return to the Source, to God. I’m not praying for the world, Jesus says. I’m praying for these who have come to believe what I’ve told them about you and their relationship with you. They have believed it and are giving themselves to it. They are not from the world, just as I am not from the world. They have chosen to be awake, not asleep, to live in the light, not darkness. And that’s very hard to do in this world that prefers sleepwalking and being in the dark. The world of illusory values, like happiness having to do with what we earn or buy or own, or climbing the ladder to success and getting lots of recognition. The world that confuses its darkness for light, like killing people because we think we are right, or abandoning the sacred creation to those who exploit and destroy it, or tolerating the poverty of millions of our brothers and sisters, feeling justified in our affluence.

I think that Nicodemus has realized down deep that though he thought he was in the light all these years, he was really in the dark. But now Jesus is going to help him come to the light, to wake up, to go back home spiritually to where he came from. Can a man be born again when he is old, asked Nicodemus? Jesus is saying to him, You bet! It doesn’t matter how young or old we are. It is never too late to wake up!

We don’t know what Nicodemus did with his encounter with Jesus. But the disciples did respond to Jesus. And Jesus is praying for them as they continue to live in the world as those who know where they really come from. When John talks about the “world,” he’s not talking about the good creation of God. He’s talking about the world that chooses to stay asleep, to stay in the dark, to live without knowing where it came from. He’s talking about the world of human beings and our systems and structures, even our religious ones, and our tendency to get lost from the Source, to remain in the dark. There may even be a lot of God-talk, as there is in our society today, but without real meaning in our lives and actions. As Jesus said elsewhere, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I ask? (Luke 6:46)”

Jesus is talking about the “world” which lulls us into forgetting where we came from. Jesus isn’t saying we are aliens from another planet. The aim of Christian life is not to get out of this world but to live in it in a

different way. Jesus is talking about remembering our relationship with God and that our being in this world is a tremendous gift and blessing. And we are not here by accident. We, like Jesus, have been sent. Our lives have this deep quality of “sent-ness,” of purpose, to nurture, care for, and give to life. God is love—another great theme of John’s gospel. And since we are from God, that’s who we really are, too.

In John’s gospel there are not “good” people and “bad” people. There are simply those who know where they come from and those who have forgotten, or choose to not remember. There are those who would rather stay in the dark, even when it is so unfulfilling and unhappy. Because being born anew can be painful. It means letting go of the things that we’ve become addicted to in our culture, in this forgetful world. It means letting go of the smaller self and discovering the greater self, the true self that is able to transcend itself to embrace others and the world with God’s love. Maybe that’s why Jesus prays to God for his disciples, for us. We need his prayers. We need Jesus as our spiritual nourishment as we go about this journey of being reborn, of getting back to where we came from, of working with the changes that need to happen in us so that we live as those who are who are awakening to our true life.

While we were in Portland, Oregon, I visited the Japanese Garden, a beautiful place of wonder and peace. There is a sand and stone garden there, a large expanse of white sand with eight stones placed in it, seven smaller ones and a large standing stone. It reflects the story of a tigress who wanted to test the courage of her seven cubs. So she forced them into the sea to see how they would do. Seeing the cubs’ predicament, the Buddha plunged into the sea and became the source of the cubs’ sustenance and survival. I thought of the story of Peter wanting to walk on the stormy sea to Jesus (Matt. 14:22ff; Mk. 6:45ff; John 6:16ff). As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, he was fine. But when he was distracted by the frightening waves, he sank. Jesus shared and shares our life in this world, along with all our struggles to remember who we are and where we come from. He becomes the source of our sustenance as we continue our journeys of faith. He continues for us today as a living reminder of who we really are and where we really come from.

We can heartily and joyfully embrace this business of being born again. It is our spiritual vocation. When we talk here about the inward and outward journeys of the life of faith, we are talking about being in that process of being born again, born anew. The spiritual practices we commit ourselves to—silence, inner listening, prayer, reading of scripture, self-examination and deepening self-awareness—these are the ways we ground ourselves in remembering who we really are and where we come from. And the outward journeys we undertake as we sense and follow what we feel God is calling us to do with our gifts and our lives—these are the ways we live in a transformative way in the world as those who are not from the world that

forgets itself as God’s creation and people who have forgotten they are God’s children.

This spiritual journey of being born again or remembering where we come from is not an instantaneous experience. It is a life-long process or journey. Jesus’ ministry was to wake people up to their true identities. This is what the word “repentance” really means—waking up, taking on a new consciousness, going in a new direction. All of this isn’t easy. That’s why we need to stay close to Jesus, and thus to God. That’s why we have this community whose purpose is not mutual criticism or complaint, but encouragement and the nurturing of a spirit of freedom that comes from God’s love for each of us and God’s call to each of us to discover and live fully who God has made us to be for the sake of the world.

It really comes down to this: Am I on the journey of coming to Jesus, like Nicodemus, seeking a new way of being in the world, maybe not even sure what I am looking for but sensing in Jesus the very light of God? Am I engaged in the journey of remembering who I am and where I came from, the journey of being born again, born from above? In the end, that’s what really matters. What the world needs most, and Jesus knew this, is persons who know they are from God, who remember that this world is God’s good creation. What is needed most is persons and communities that are actively committed to their own transformation so that they can give to the world something that is light instead of darkness, something that is remembering instead of forgetfulness, something that is life-giving instead of destructive.

There is plenty wrong with the world. We can sit around and bemoan it all day long. We can complain about others, about our leaders, about conditions of poverty and war and the like. But Jesus wants to invite us into spiritual awakening. He calls us to remember who we are and where we came from. If we are doing that, then we will know both who we really are and what we have to give. We will know where we come from and where God is sending us.