

Being Born from Above

John 3:1-17 *Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."*

Nicodemus comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. Maybe he doesn't want to be seen by his colleagues in the Sanhedrin, the governing council, who are opposed to Jesus. Or perhaps John uses the night imagery to show Nicodemus coming out of darkness, drawn to the light, to Jesus.

Nicodemus says: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." He feels positively toward Jesus, yet hesitant. He may not know exactly what he is seeking, but there is something compelling about Jesus. Maybe Nicodemus is inviting a theological discussion, rabbi to rabbi, a stimulating exchange of ideas.

Jesus' response comes from a completely different place: No one can "see" the kingdom of God unless that person is born from above, or born anew. The word "see" means more than looking at something. It means recognizing something, becoming fully aware of it and part of it. Jesus said similar things elsewhere. "Unless you become like a child you cannot enter the kingdom of God." "It is harder for a person of wealth to get into the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." In order to be part of God's kingdom, life as God created it to be, something has to change. We need a different orientation. We have to wake up to our true self and to God. That's what the spiritual life is about—waking up, being born afresh, living as part of God's kingdom now. The kingdom of God is not an ideal time in the future when everything is perfect. It is now. Jesus taught that the kingdom is near, among, and within us (Lk. 17:20-21). We can "see" it, wake up to it, live it, IF we are "born from above." Nicodemus may have been looking for an interesting discussion. Jesus took it to a whole different level.

This reminded me of a story from Buddhism. When the Buddha was very old and nearing death, a young man came to visit him. Ananda, the Buddha's assistant, tried to keep him away. "Please let him come in," said the Buddha. The man sat down and asked the Buddha something like this: "Are the members of other spiritual groups and practices enlightened?" The Buddha looked on him with compassion. "What does it matter whether they are enlightened or not? What matters is whether you are waking up, becoming liberated." Commenting on this story, Thich Nhat Hanh says that when you ask a spiritual teacher a question, ask one that can change your life!

Jesus is not interested in theological discussions with Nicodemus, but in Nicodemus himself, and all of us. Are we being born from above? Are we coming alive in our true nature as children of God? Are we partaking in what Jesus calls "eternal life"? Not life after death, but life here and now, "seeing" the kingdom of God and becoming more and more a part of it. That is life now AND forever.

What does it mean to be "born from above"? It is living a life that is open to God's spirit. We are body and we are spirit. Neither can be ignored. Jesus shows that we come alive when we first live from the spirit, out of our relationship with God. We come into this world as both body and spirit. Life tends to distract us from our spiritual center. We fall under the influence of what the Gospel of John calls "the world." Not the world as God's good creation, but the world that lives without reference to its sacred source. The world of power, greed, self-centeredness, and such.

Being born from above means waking up to who we really are and where our life truly comes from. It is not having some other-worldly experience that lifts our feet off the ground. It is about living our lives, as we speak of it here, as an inward and outward journey of faith. It is working with our lives prayerfully and with attentiveness so that we become increasingly open to God's spirit. This is not a quick process. We carry many experiences and habits of thinking and acting that keep us from the openness, trust, and perceptiveness that attune us to God's spirit. To me, "being born from above" means "being always in the process of being born from above." We are always working with it because all of us have things in us that make our rebirth difficult.

The Church of the Covenant has always tried to take this re-birthing seriously as the nature of Christian life. God's spirit implants visions and sounds calls in many peoples' hearts and minds. The wind of God's spirit is blowing all the time, all over the place. As Jesus says, it comes, it goes. What we have learned is that to respond to those visions, those calls, and to let them become embodied in and through us, we need to work with

our own lives. We need to enter and stay with that process of being born from above. Why? Because we are attached to many things that keep us from the life of the spirit. Fear. Lack of trust. Wanting to control events and people. Money and security. The harmful feelings we hold onto--self-hate, guilt, obsessiveness, anger, and so forth. And the habitual ways we relate to others out of our own insecurities and fears. It is not easy. But we find that as we continue to work with these things, we become more open to God and to others. There is more room for God's spirit to move in and through us, and we become more aware of and responsive to the spirit. It's not magical. It's not mystical. It's the way we were created to live.

As we begin to live by the spirit of God, says Jesus, we become like the wind. You never know where it's coming from and you don't know where it is going. When we are engaged in the inward and outward journeys, living by the leading of God's spirit, sometimes we feel a lot like that. Where we come from doesn't determine where we are going. The past does not determine the future. We remain open in the present to God's spirit, and we follow trustfully step by step. It is not like the "normal" way of doing things. You analyse the past, you project your aims for the future, and you proceed methodically. Living by the spirit, however, requires a whole different approach. Prayer. Openness. Trust. Risk. Attentiveness.

Nicodemus says finally: "How can these things be?" Jesus must have looked at him with a mixture of compassion and a shaking of the head. You are a teacher of Israel and yet you don't know what I'm talking about?! We can be around religion and the church all our lives and never go to that deeper personal level Jesus is talking about. We can have minds full of religious and spiritual ideas, even become experts on spirituality, and never touch the reality of what all those ideas and words are pointing to. When we talk about the importance of the spiritual life and working with spiritual practices, or disciplines, it is about entering into the process of our own re-birth. It is about opening up the awareness that is at the core of our being. Then we begin to let our living become nourished, led, and enlightened by God's spirit, as persons, as a community, as mission groups.

How do we sustain this journey of being born from above? Two things. Jesus talks about belief. It is belief in Jesus as God's only Son. This does not have to mean that Christians tell those in other spiritual traditions that they are wrong or condemned, that we have the only truth. It means that we ourselves commit to our own rebirth as we look to Jesus. "Belief" here does not mean having convictions in our heads about Jesus. It is not holding tightly to "ideas" about Jesus. It means looking to Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection, as the source of the new life we are seeking.

Jesus uses a story of Israel to illustrate. The Israelites were tired of Moses' leadership, tired of wandering around in the desert, and fed up with God. Better to be back in Egypt than this aimless and exhausting wandering about! So God sends poisonous snakes as punishment. We may have trouble with such a picture of God, but let's go on. Moses pleads with God for the people. God tells him to make a bronze serpent and hold it up. When the people look to the serpent, they are immune from the poisonous snakes. Just so, says Jesus, the Son of Man must also be lifted up--a reference to the cross and the ascension--so that whoever believes in him, looks to him, will find eternal life, fullness of life here and now as well as forever, life as it is meant to be lived.

I visited the Japanese Garden in Portland, Oregon, a few years ago. There is a very large rock and sand Zen garden, with a tall standing stone and seven smaller stones. The sand is raked to resemble ocean waves. Such gardens are normally not created on a theme or story, but this one was. A mother tiger decided to test the strength of her cubs. So she drove them into the sea so that they might, as we would say, sink or swim. The Buddha saw the cubs in their plight, and came and stood in the sea so that the cubs could see him and draw strength. I think that is what looking to Jesus is about. On this journey of becoming born from above, learning to live by God's spirit, we look to Jesus from whom we draw strength, insight, comfort, and encouragement.

Second, we continue this re-birth process as we keep touching the central meaning of Jesus. He embodies God's love for us and the world. Here the gospel writer steps back from the story to write those familiar and beloved words--God loved the world so much that God gave the only Son so that we might be saved, so that we might have eternal life, life as it was meant to be lived. God did not send the Son to condemn the world but to save it, to bring healing and wholeness. It could not be more clear. God who created the world loves the world and us with unshakable love. God's love comes without condemnation, but with complete and utter compassion, and the power to help us be reborn. God's will is for life, our life, that we might come alive as we were created to be.