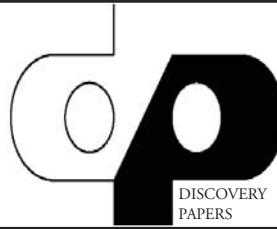


BORN OF THE SPIRIT

SERIES: PORTRAITS JOHN PAINTED



Catalog No. 110717

John 3:1-16

2nd Message

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What does the phrase “born again Christian” make you think of? It likely calls to remind believers who are convinced of the power of witness; who can describe the circumstances of their conversion to Christ (“How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed”); those who have confidence in preaching and persuasion. Think of an evangelist like Josh McDowell producing *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* on a simpler level, printed tracts, billboard messages, bumper stickers, or a guy in a football stadium holding up a Bible verse.

We might think of those things, but we also ought to think of “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” The Apostle John wrote his biography of Jesus with a purpose, “these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30). John wrote to persuade his readers with the clear intention that they should believe his testimony and receive new life as a result.

The command by Jesus “you must be born again,” is found only in John’s Gospel, specifically in chapter three where we read of Jesus’ encounter with a man named Nicodemus. Of course, the iconic invitation, John 3:16, is also in this chapter. I mentioned last Sunday that we’re beginning a sermon series, *Portraits John Painted*, in which we’ll read personal stories, John’s telling of Jesus’ intimate encounters with various people. So we turn now to the meeting with Nicodemus to consider these great themes: new birth and God’s love.

Opening

John 3:1-2:

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Previously, in chapter two, we began this series in an obscure place, Cana of Galilee, noting the first of Jesus’ signs

which occurred almost in secret. The setting of these verses has changed dramatically. The events occur in Jerusalem during Passover. Surrounded by large crowds, Jesus ejected crooks and profiteers from the temple (the first of two times he will do this). He made a whip out of cords and drove the money changers from the temple. If that weren’t enough, he began to do miraculous signs that drew the crowds in fascination and angered Jewish authorities. In these circumstances an important Jewish leader approached Jesus to converse with him at night.

One of the responsibilities we’re going to have as we deal with this story, is to try to figure out what Nicodemus is saying. We have his words, but we find ourselves wanting to know: What was the tone of his voice? What did he mean? This difficulty begins in John 3:2:

“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing...”

Nicodemus is respectful, certainly. He calls Jesus “Rabbi.” My guess is that he was glad somebody finally threw the crooks out of the temple. But Nicodemus is also a practiced diplomat who gives nothing of himself away. It becomes clear by the end of this document that John has affection for Nicodemus. He is mentioned by name three times (most of the encounters in John do not include names).

In chapter seven he serves as Jesus’ advocate at court, though he is not identified as one of Jesus’ followers. In chapter 19, we read of the help he rendered to Joseph of Arimathea during the burial of Jesus, though again Joseph is clearly identified as a disciple of Jesus in the text and Nicodemus only as his assistant. Returning to 3:2 we observe that Nicodemus begins a conversation but leaves all his options open, makes no commitment, and is polite but keeps his distance.

Also, Nicodemus came by night. Was this because the crowds were gone and there was a better chance for a longer conversation? Or did he come by night so that, if necessary, he could deny ever having been there? We don’t know. I think John intends us to ask these questions—especially if we are at all like this Pharisee who came by night: privileged, educated, spiritually aware, attracted to Jesus. Perhaps we

imitate Nicodemus' diplomatic approach to Jesus, preferring to have learned conversation in a congenial setting with all options left open.

Conversation

Jesus has something different in mind.

John 3:3:

³In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Jesus issues a challenge instead of engaging in polite conversation. He points to a choice that must be made, not information that might be exchanged. Nicodemus will respond with two questions (v. 4 and v. 9) which will guide us as we move forward in this text.

John 3:4:

⁴"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

This verse records a genuine question, but it is surely a despairing one. The image of "re-entering my mother's womb," is impossible and nonsensical. If you are really a teacher from God, your message has no application to me.

John 3:5-7:

⁵Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'

We note first that Jesus declares the stakes in this current discussion to be very high. We are not talking about the weather. We are not wondering if the National Football League will get its act together. No one can see (v. 3) or enter (v. 5) the kingdom of God without new birth. Your life will partake of the living reality of God or it will not. His presence, his rule, his power, his comfort—all of these require a radically transformed heart. You must be born again. The stakes are very high.

Second, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he can't fix what is broken. No effort at reform will suffice. Jesus insists on

transformation at the deepest level—a work that can only be accomplished by the Spirit of God. The stakes are high. You can't fix yourself. You must be born again.

Nicodemus attempts to dismiss the words of Jesus with wistful literalism—no one can re-enter a womb, can he? His response is not so much a rejection of Jesus as the declaration of a heart weary with broken dreams. I imagine a once idealistic young man who had grown disillusioned with the religion of the Pharisees. He is drawn to Jesus, but he had known one too many hypocrites, seen earnest efforts of a life change amount to nothing. He was old enough to be jaded by religion that changed only outward appearance and did nothing to alter the heart, yet he remains a teacher of this failed ideology. He balks at Jesus' message because he doesn't think anyone can be changed for the better, that all of us are stuck living with the hand we've been dealt.

Recall the musical "My Fair Lady." Eliza Doolittle is taken from the streets of London, taught to speak proper English, introduced as a mysterious newcomer to English high society, but in the end she is no happier than she had been and misses much of what she left behind. She had been educated but not altered. The play illustrates the perspective of Nicodemus. New packaging is possible, new birth is not. People don't change.

Jesus acknowledged that, 'flesh is born of flesh'. You got your life from your parents, and you will pass it onto your kids. The generation before us wasn't terrific, we're not terrific, and our kids will be the same. Unless God acts, everyone is born once and there is no reason to hope for anything different.

God Must Intervene!

John 3:8:

⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Jesus insists that you must be born again, and you can be born again. The Spirit intervenes. God himself takes up residence in us. He gives us a new identity, new motives, and new hope. Genuine change, lasting change, is the work of the Spirit.

Human beings were first given life as clay and were animated by God's breath. And the wind still blows where it pleases. God still gives life by his Spirit, breathing his very

presence into us. Nicodemus' was convinced that human beings could not change. However, with God all things are possible.

John 3:9:

9“How can this be?”

Here is Nicodemus' second question. His first question expressed doubt that anyone can change. Verse nine questions the willingness of God to get involved. Nicodemus had been a scholar of religion, living among religious people all his life. I think he believed something like this: God is to be found in parchments, rituals, and theological debates. His actions are ancient history, and his promises apply to a distant future; but he doesn't get involved; he does not offer personal transformation in the world I inhabit. “How can this be?” The breath of the Spirit causing new birth? It doesn't happen. I can't fix myself and God won't fix me.

John 3:10:

10“You are Israel's teacher,” said Jesus, “and you do not understand these things?”

Jesus said, in effect, “Nicodemus, your despair is unworthy of you. You know that God hasn't given up on his people; he is not far off in the distance. You know better. The wind is invisible to us, but we see the trees bend. We see the chaff blow. God is like that, and you know it. You know that he is often invisible to us, even when he is present and active.”

Nicodemus you know the Scriptures. You know that God sometimes explains himself, and sometimes does not. Sometimes his ways are mysterious, and sometimes they make sense. His hiddenness does not mean he is distant or unaware or unconcerned.

Then, Jesus moves on to the most important words in this conversation, he speaks of himself.

John 3:11-15:

11I tell you the truth, we speak what we know, and we testify of what we have seen, but still you do not accept our testimony. 12I have spoken to you of earthly things and you don't believe, how

then will you believe if I speak to you of heavenly things? 13No one has ever gone into heaven except the One who came down from heaven, the Son of man. 14Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of man must be lifted up 15that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

There's only one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man, there is only one who can declare the mysteries of heavenly things. Jesus is identifying his unique role as God's servant.

Further, Jesus declares himself, not only the unique witness to heavenly truth, but also the Savior whose “lifting up” becomes the vehicle of eternal life—the new birth Nicodemus found impossible.

The Love of God

John 3:16 (much loved, often preached) begins with the word ‘for.’ It is a conclusion drawn from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus.

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

The staggering nature of the love of God was not clear to Nicodemus and is often obscure to us. Nicodemus was used to rabbinic conversations. His religion was filled with surface discussions and a despairing heart. Jesus' teaching gained power in this description of love. God's love expressed itself as an extraordinary gift—the giving of his own Son. The Pharisee who came by night found that his persistent questions were answered by the love of God. All of our fears and questions are answered there as well.

The wind of the Spirit was blowing for Nicodemus this night. Jesus did not raise his voice but his words overwhelmed every objection, countered every evasion. These words of Jesus, might very well be the wind of the Spirit whispering to you as you read them. You must be born again. God loves us. We need help. He will help. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

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