

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Spiritual Sensation

Gospel Lesson

John 3:1-17 (NRSV)

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Bible/Sermon Focus

The third chapter of John's Gospel is one of the most quoted and misunderstood sections of the entire Christian Bible. John 3:16 specifically has been used by some Christians as a sort of litmus test for who is promised eternal salvation and who will burn in hell for eternity. This portrayal of God causes major cognitive dissonance for many of us. We hear that God is love and that God loves us like a parent, and then we hear out of the same mouth that upon death God becomes a torturer willing to punish us for an eternity.

The God portrayed in these descriptions is a God of insanity, One who flips on a dime. And this reading of the text misses the rest of the story! Jesus isn't talking about salvation after death. He's not talking about something that is on the other side of where we are. Jesus is talking about a life eternal and abundant that is available to us right here.

This deeply abundant life is mystical and spiritual, to be sure. But it is also accessible and perceivable. This deeply abundant life is indeed personal, yes. But it is also communal.

Jesus tries his best to explain to Nicodemus that encounters with the Spirit are life changing. That they are so visceral that a person is unable to deny their own experience (It's like the wind...even if you can't see it, understand it...you feel it). And encounters with the Spirit leave a person changed. Once you see this reign of God, once you have a Holy Spirit moment, there's no turning back.

The reign of God, the kingdom of God, eternal life, and salvation are all right here, available in the present moment. The writers of John's Gospel believed in a "realized eschatology". That the Reign of God on earth was about a "here and now" existence and not about salvation after this life.

If Nicodemus seems unsatisfied with Jesus' answers that's because he is. Nicodemus has lived his life in a certain way, following rules and gaining stature among his community. And now Jesus comes, saying, actually love is the guiding force, and God can bring life abundant here and now. You just have to be open to the Spirit. You just have to be open to the Spirit who will likely change...everything. And the change will be so radical, so visceral, so undeniable, that you find that you are living your life in response to it.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe an eye-opening experience that you've had.
2. Have you seen the Kingdom of God? What does it look like?
3. What does it mean to be born of the Spirit?
4. Like Nicodemus, when has the movement of the Spirit moved you away from something you assumed to be true? Or been in contrast with what you have been taught?

Prayer

God of visions and dreams, God of sound and stillness, God of change and ever-present, rebirth us in your Spirit. Give us eyes to see your reign. Inspire us to respond with our lives. Speak into our individual souls, and into the soul of our community. Amen.

"One does not have to wait for a future revealing of the fullness of God's glory and God's will for the world or for eternal life to be bestowed. Both are available now in Jesus." - Gail R. O'Day