

John 3: 1-17 For God So Loved the World

The Gospel passage given to us this morning contains 2 Christian motifs that have become so widely known that even non-Christians have heard of them and have some ideas about them, from the way they're used. In fact, they're seen and heard so commonly in our larger American culture that they've come to have lives of their own, walking on their own apart from, and possibly away from, the biblical context in which Jesus spoke these words.

This is quite ironic, because, of all the gospel writers, John is the one whose style of writing is to convey Jesus's message in the context of human drama, an event that's an encounter with Jesus, and then let Jesus have a long speech to explain what he means. That's John. As we shift from Matthew to John's gospel during Lent, we will see this.

Does anyone have any idea which "motifs" I'm talking about? They are the phrase "being Born Again" and "John 3: 16." The first one is often put in the form of a question, "Are You Born Again?" Or "are you a Born Again Christian?" and "John 3:16" is just that citation, because if you know John 3:16, you know what it says; no need to spell out the actual verse which says: 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.

You may have seen them on bumper stickers and on billboards, and I mean no disrespect; my favorite seminary professor of Systematic Theology had the most succinct expressions of profound theological truth that I'd love to have bumper stickers made for them. So, if you have been touched by these expressions in a life-giving way, well and good.

But it is also the case these phrases are often used to judge and exclude people as being outside of God's concern, beyond the reach of God's boundless

love for this world, of which Jesus talks about in his very next breath, John 3: 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.”

This morning, we heard these powerful words in the context of John’s Gospel in which Jesus said them, in the human event of Nicodemus’s encounter with Jesus, so that we might hear them anew; indeed, hear them Again, as the words from above, for a richer and deeper meaning than what they have become in the popular culture.

What did Jesus mean by them? We have Nicodemus to thank, for asking the question. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, an expert in the Law of Moses, and a leader among them. And he came to Jesus by night. The Gospel writer John uses “Night” as a symbol of separation from the presence of God. Perhaps Nicodemus was afraid to be seen with Jesus, for his works, which are called “signs” in John’s Gospels, had raised suspicion among the Jewish leaders.

So, Nicodemus starts to say to Jesus, “We,” aligning himself safely with the legitimate authority among the Jews; “We know 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.”

Then Jesus jumps in, even before Nicodemus gets to his question, and says, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus asks back, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

You may have noticed that, in the passage that I just read, and earlier in the Gospel reading, you did not hear the phrase “born again,” but “born from above.” If I were to read you the same verse from my Japanese Bible, which is a direct translation from Greek into Japanese, you would hear “being born anew.” This is because Jesus is using the Greek word “anothen” which has all three meanings in English of “again,” “anew” and “from above.”

But Nicodemus understood Jesus's words only in the sense of being born again, physically. So, no wonder he asked, "how can a grown person go back into the mother's womb and come out again?" So, Jesus explains what he meant by "being born "anothen," again/from above/anew." Jesus says, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

The reader of John's Gospel would recall that the last time "water" and "Spirit" appeared in the same sentence was when John the Baptist was talking about his baptism of water and the greater work of Jesus who would baptize with the Spirit. In John 1: 33, John the Baptist says, "I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."

So, by the term "being born again, or from above," Jesus is speaking of being born of the Spirit. And this birth is the work of the Spirit of God which is not dependent on, nor controlled by, human will or human action.

Jesus uses the image of the wind to explain this birth he's talking about: "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."

Like the word "anothen" which means both again and from above, Jesus is again using the Greek word that means both Wind and the Spirit. The Spirit of God, like the wind, blows where God wills. Its movement follows God's desire. In the beginning, the Spirit/Wind from God swept over the waters...

Nicodemus responds in awe "how can these things be?" See, Nicodemus belongs to the world where one does one's best in keeping the law to ensure one is "good" with God, and he cannot quite comprehend what Jesus is pointing to, this free-floating movement of the Spirit of God. What is God up to?

Jesus continues and talks about the Son of Man who descended from heaven, that is to say, who came from above, and would ascend to heaven. This is about Jesus himself who is the Word of God who became flesh to live among us, descending from heaven, who would then be crucified, dead and buried, precisely to be raised from death and ascended to heaven. Being born from above, then, is believing and trusting in Jesus who has descended from above.

Then, in a move that seems rather random, Jesus talks about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. What is that all about? Well, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus who is well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures and familiar with the Moses tradition. Jesus is referring to a story from the Hebrew Scripture, the Book of Numbers, where the Israelites near the end of their journey through the wilderness start to complain to God and to Moses, saying “why did you bother to bring us out of Egypt just to die here; there is no food and no water.” And about the heavenly food of Manna God provided for their sustenance, they say “we hate this miserable food!” So, God has a poisonous snake bite and kill many of them. When that happens, the Israelites beg Moses to appeal to God. So, God, precisely to save those who had rebelled against God, has Moses make a bronze snake, put it on the pole and raise it high, so anyone who were bitten by the snake would look at it and live. Looking at the symbol that reminds them of their own sinfulness, they are saved.

Here is a God, who loves not only those who are obedient, but also the rebellious, the betrayers, the sinners, the complainers...and bends backwards to save them. That’s how this God loves this world.

And Jesus speaks of his own death on the cross to serve the same life-giving purpose of God as the bronze serpent Moses made and raised on the pole; those who rejected Jesus and put him on the cross, would look at him raised up on the

cross, and live to know the mercy and the boundless love of God, whose only Son, Jesus was.

It is after making this powerful point of how this God loves the world that reject its life-giver and sustainer God, Jesus says what is now known simply as John 3: 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.”

To say God “SO” loved the world does not mean God loved the world So, So much. Rather, “SO,” here means “in this way,” as in, “like so,” Jesus just told Nicodemus the story that shows how God saves even and especially in the face of rebellion. That’s how God loves, and the into rebellious world the Spirit of God goes.

Then, John 3: 16 is really about God's gracious transformation of even our worst into our redemption. It’s not about who’s in and who’s out, who is born again and who is not, but rather about God’s consistent intent to love, save, and bless the whole world.

Did Nicodemus get that? Do we get that? Nicodemus makes 2 more appearances in the Gospel of John. He next appears in Chapter 7 where he appears to vaguely defend Jesus when the Pharisees are trying to have Jesus arrested. He doesn’t quite come out of the shadow to stand with Jesus. Then he appears again in Chapter 19, when he buries Jesus, together with another man who was a disciple in secret for his fear of the Jewish leaders.

Nicodemus never joined Jesus as his disciples during Jesus’s earthly ministry, but Nicodemus never quite left him either. He is, like us, on a journey of faith, learning to live by the Spirit. Nicodemus is our companion on this Lenten journey.

For the sake of all the Nicodemus of the world, I offer a bumper-sticker worthy quote from my professor, Dr. Christopher Morse. He wrote on the blackboard, “God saved the world in Christ once and for all, but not all at once!”

The world is already saved, and it takes time to know what it means to live a life born from above.

The next time someone asks me “Are You Born Again,” I may venture to respond “ by the power of the Spirit and by the grace of God, I am.”