

Sermon, January 28, 2024

John 3:1-16  
"Born of the Spirit"

This morning, we come to one of the best-known passages in the Bible, especially among those who call themselves 'born again' Christians. It is also often misunderstood, or not understood as fully as it can be.

It is nighttime, and a man named Nicodemus comes to speak with Jesus. He is a Pharisee, a religious leader in the community, and perhaps he came to Jesus at night to avoid being seen by his fellow Pharisees. The Pharisees were teachers, and Nicodemus apparently saw Jesus as an equal by virtue of the fact that he addressed him as Rabbi. He also says that he sees Jesus as a teacher who has come from God because of the signs he has shown - in other words, the miracles he has performed. That is probably why he did not want the other Pharisees to see him with Jesus, because they saw those signs as being demonic in nature - that they were influenced by Satan rather than by God.

Jesus replies to him, saying, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above". Nicodemus doesn't know what to make of this, and asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?". His confusion may be due to a circumstance in the Greek language. The words meaning 'born from above' can also mean 'born anew', i.e., 'born again'.

Jesus is saying, 'born from above', but Nicodemus hears 'born anew'.

So, which is right? Well, actually it is not a matter of either/or, but both/and. We can think of it as 'born anew from above'. Jesus makes that clear with his very next statement. He says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit". Notice that the word 'flesh' is not used in a negative sense - at least not in the way that the apostle Paul uses it. We human beings are made of flesh and blood, but we are more than that - we are also spiritual beings. Unfortunately, we are not always aware of that fact.

But before we can better understand what Jesus is saying, we have to have a sense of what he means by the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God, in the popular sense, is understood as a place called heaven, and many see being born again as a guarantee that that is where they will go after they have died. That may be a part of it. Jesus does say elsewhere, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." But it means much more than that. Throughout the gospels, especially in

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the idea of the kingdom of God is the centerpiece of Jesus' teaching, and it is referred to, not as someplace we go, but something that comes to us.

We express that each week when we pray the Lord's Prayer, requesting that "thy kingdom come". And it has both future and present connotations. It looks forward to a time when God's divine reign is established here on earth, but Jesus also speaks of it as already here. We, however, are unable to recognize its presence unless we are born from above. Essentially that means that through God's Holy Spirit our eyes are opened to both its presence and its possibility. It is a spiritual order that can only be entered by a spiritual rebirth.

In the 17th chapter of Luke, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is! or, 'There it is!' . For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you". Those last couple of words have been translated in different ways - it is among you, or in the midst of you, or, it has also been translated as within you. In other words, it is here among us as a group, as a congregation, and it is also located in each of us individually- it dwells within our heart, that is, if we have been born anew from above.

But how does this come about? In the 14th verse in today's reading Jesus says, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life". This refers to a story in the Book of Numbers where the Israelites are in the wilderness on their way to the promised land. But they were getting restless, and frustrated, and began to speak against both God and Moses. Well, this angers God, so he sends poisonous snakes among them, and some are bitten and die. So, Moses prays to God, who then tells Moses to lift up a serpent on a pole, and if those who are bitten look upon it, they will live. So, Moses fashions a serpent out of bronze and lifts it on a pole, and those who are bitten look at it are healed and lived.

So, the Son of Man was also lifted up - not on a pole, but on a cross. And if we look to him, and believe in him, through that faith we are born from above and find eternal life. We should also be aware that the phrase kingdom of God is interchangeable with eternal life, recognizing that eternal life can refer to life everlasting, but it is also something that we can experience in this life. Eternal life is life intertwined with, and lived in, the Spirit of God, through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the 19th century there was a debate that continues today as to whether being born from above is a onetime thing, usually through a dramatic experience often having to do with arising out of an experience of darkness and coming into the light that is Christ, or if it is something that a person grows into gradually over a period of time. I think they are both right, but even for

those who have a onetime dramatic encounter with the Spirit of Christ, that is just the beginning of a lifetime of growing into a deeper spiritual life.

So , verse 16 , perhaps the best-known verse in all of scripture, says it all- “ 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”. Put simply, God loves us, and wants to know us, and wants us to know him! Amen.

**Let us pray:** O Lord, our God, we are made glad by the good news of your love for us and for all. We thank you for giving us New life when we are born from above. We thank you for your action in Christ by which our lives are measured, found wanting, and renewed. Help us to remember your gifts so that we may praise you with lives of joy and service. As always, Lord, we pray for peace in our homes, our communities, our nation , and the world - remembering to you Israel and Gaza, and the Ukraine. We also lift up the First Congregational Church of New London. May they recover soon from their loss. Amen.