

Exodus 24: 12-18

Psalm 99

Romans 6: 1-15

John 3: 1-16

Sermon for March 5, 2023

THE NEW BIRTH

Summary: You must be born of water and the spirit.

The selection from the third chapter of John's gospel has probably been quoted and written about and preached from more than any other selection of verses in the whole Bible, and of course it concludes with that one verse – 3: 16 – that many would argue is the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its most refined form:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

(I remember a few years back, when you couldn't watch any live golfing tournament on TV without seeing a tall skinny guy with a scruffy beard holding up a sign that read John 3: 18. He always reminded me of Shaggy from the Scooby-Doo cartoons.)

We'll come back to that verse in a bit, but for now let's go back to the beginning of the selection, and think about the conception that begins the train of thought of which 3: 16 is the culmination. When Nicodemus, a very rich and important member of the Jewish religious establishment, comes to see Jesus one night, obviously seeking to learn more about this young preacher from the provinces, the first thing Jesus tells him about is the importance of being born again.

The dialogue that follows between Jesus and Nicodemus has pretty clearly been fore-shortened by the Gospel writer in his account written so many decades later of what happened on that evening long ago, but what we have makes it perfectly clear that Jesus was using the image of a new birth to represent a radical transformation that must happen in the lives of most people in order to bring their lives into alignment with the values and habits and duties and rewards of the new kind of life that Jesus uses another phrase or image to represent, that of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This concept of a new birth or rebirth or birth from above or regeneration is one which virtually all the other writers of the New Testament themselves used, and clearly they took it from Jesus himself. In one of his letters, Peter talks about being born again not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible (1 Peter 1: 3) James speaks of God begetting us with the word of truth (James 1: 18). Paul's letter to Titus speaks of the washing of regeneration (Titus 3: 5); in his letter to the Romans he speaks of the Christian as dying with Christ and the rising to life anew (6: 11); to the Corinthians he describes those who have lately come to the Christian faith as babes in Christ, (1 Cor 3) and says that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The new man is created after God in righteousness he tells the Ephesians, as we could go on and on. But Perhaps Jesus himself says it best: Matthew 19: 14 records for us what Jesus said when his disciples tried to keep those pesky little children away from him.

“Let the little children come to me,” Jesus says, “and to not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

That last quotation has something in common with what Jesus said to Nicodemus at the beginning of their exchange, that unless you are born again you can't even see the kingdom of God, and then he immediately follows that up by saying that unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he or she cannot enter the Kingdom. So we have Jesus using a new image to explain what he means by the new birth or being born again, it is the image of being born of water and the Spirit. But what does that mean?

First water. Water is the symbol of cleansing, and the cleansing that Jesus is referencing is spiritual cleansing, the cleansing from the filth and taint of sin, the cleansing of spiritual forgiveness of our sins. What Jesus tells Nicodemus is that unless you have been spiritually forgiven, forgiven by God, of your sins, you cannot see or enter God's kingdom.

Without Jesus, that spiritual law would be the death knell of our hope. But with Jesus, because of Jesus, it is the source of our peace and joy. Jesus died for our sins: that is the good news, that is the gospel. On the cross Jesus washed us all with the water of forgiveness. Because of the cross, your sins are forgiven by God, all of your sins, past, present and future. And all of mine. And all the sins of all your ancestors and all your descendents.

And what comes next? Is the natural question to ask. What is the point of having one's sins forgiven? Is it in order that we may continue in our old ways, with our

old motives? Was Christ's sacrifice in order simply to get us off the hook with God, again and again, forever and ever?

There is a danger of regarding the great gift of the gospel in that way, and it is the misunderstanding that Paul addresses in the passage of Romans we read this morning, although Paul uses a different imagery, that of being dead to sin and alive to the righteousness of Christ. His point is that Christ didn't die to give us license to return to our old ways; he died to make possible a new creation in Christ.

And surely that's what Jesus is referencing as well when he speaks of being baptized in the spirit. If we go back to 3:16, the great proclamation towards which all the rest of this dialogue leads, we find that the intention of God's great plan in Christ is that all may receive what our translation calls 'everlasting life.' But the Greek word that's translated everlasting has a much deeper meaning than simply unending duration in time. It's quite clear that a life that went on forever could just as easily be hell as heaven. The idea of the word is a life that has a certain quality, that it is a certain kind of life that will also be lived forever.

And what kind of life is that? It's the life that God lives, and only God lives to perfection. It is to be lifted up above merely human, temporary, passing, transient things, into that joy and peace which belong only to God. And clearly someone can only enter into this close communion and fellowship with God when he or she renders to God that love, that reverence, that devotion, that obedience which patterns itself after the life of Jesus.

And there I think we have the true meaning of the baptism of the spirit. In the seventh chapter of his gospel, John records, speaking of the Spirit that would be given to those who follow Jesus, that the Spirit could not be given until Jesus was glorified, that is, until Jesus had returned to heaven. (John 7: 39)

The point Jesus was making in his conversation with Nicodemus was that the life everlasting, the heavenly life, is the forgiven life that has accepted Christ's own spirit as its guide and strength. What Jesus accomplished on the Cross was to wash us all clean from our sins – to give everyone a new beginning and a fresh start – and then to enable us all to receive his own Spirit as the foundation stone for our new life in Christ.

And how do we do that? It's both profoundly mysterious and profoundly simple. We don't know the machinery of it, any more than we know where the wind comes from or where the wind is going. But we can open the door to Christ's

spirit at any moment, at any time, simply by asking that Spirit into our hearts. Once we have done that, whether we are aware of it or not, we have already begun to live the life everlasting, the life of heaven, the life of God. Everyone of all times and of all places will someday begin that life.

Everyone here this morning in this church has already done so. Then why don't I already feel perfect joy and peace? you may ask. Why do I still make mistakes and go astray? Why do I still feel envy and resentment and disappointment and fear? The answer is because that heavenly life is an endless journey, and we have all just taken the first, few, faltering steps. We are all of us still babes in Christ.

The peace and joy available to us all is not the perfect peace and joy of fulfillment, it is the peace and joy of knowing that, whatever difficulties and heartaches and disappointments and failures this earthly life still holds for us, we have a home in heaven, not built of human hands, that Jesus has prepared there a place for each of us, where we and all those we love will dwell in peace and harmony forevermore. That is the promise of our faith, that is the promise of our God, that is the accomplishment of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and we pray this morning in his name that we may find earthly peace in that sweet assurance. Amen.