

Sermon: John 3:1-17; Genesis 12:1-8
"Seeing Double"

Preached at Christ Church La Plata/Wayside
Lent 2, Year A, Sunday, March 5, 2023

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Does this conversation make your head hurt? If I was Nicodemus, who had perhaps taken some risk to meet with Jesus, I would come away shaking my head.

"What is he talking about?"

What was Jesus up to? Here's this big opportunity –

one of the power elite has come out to see him, to check him out.

He could score a mega-disciple here, a connector, an influencer.

Nicodemus was a member of the ruling council of the Jewish leaders.

He was a Pharisee. They thought their fidelity to the law was all they needed to be right with God – and along comes this traveling medicine show, this Jesus, who doesn't look right, talk right, who's from Galilee, for heaven's sake – saying God's kingdom is here among you. They want to reject him – but then there are those darn miracles popping up all the time. What do they do with that?

So Nicodemus comes out to see the guy for himself. He comes at night.

And what does he get? A Jesus who seems to speak in riddles.

No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Huh?

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

The Spirit blows where it will... What?

Now maybe it's the way it's come down to us – John's Gospel is heavily influenced by Greek philosophy with its abstract categories.

But when Nicodemus says, "What?" Jesus ups the ante –

"You can't enter the kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit."

"Flesh is flesh, spirit is spirit; if you don't get it when I speak of earthly things how are you going to understand heavenly things..."

The more I read this, the less I understand it.

Which may have been Jesus' point.

We can't see it by thinking harder about it – we've got to feel it in our spirit.

In fact, we can only perceive it in our spirit.

"You need to be born anew, by water – and the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Then you're going to see who I really am. Then you'll perceive the Kingdom."

If want to "see" the Realm of God, the Life of God, active around us through the Holy Spirit – we'll need to cultivate the life of the spirit.

This is one way to understand it (and for *Water Daily* readers who already heard this this week, I apologize). I liken it to the operating system on a computer. There is the fleshly, natural human world, the human way of perceiving; and there is the world of Spirit, less accessible to our five senses but perceptible as we develop our spiritual vision. Will we run on our human system, or the spiritual one God offers? We shipped with the human one; the God-one gets installed at baptism. We can use either, which can get confusing, and really drains our batteries. The goal of the spiritual life is to transition more and more of our systems to the God-operating system, which has a built-in power supply.

Living by the spirit is something we need to cultivate. It means living by faith. So there was this guy named Avram, long, long ago, a herder who lived in a place called Ur, in what is now Iraq. He was prosperous, with family and livestock. His people worshipped many gods; each had a favorite he thought looked out for him. But somehow this Avram heard someone speak to him one day, when he was already 75, that he recognized as the one true God. Avram, later called Abraham, is where our relationship with God begins. And this voice he could hear told him to pack up everything he owned, all his herds and all his family and all their goods, leave the homeland of generations, and go to the place where God would show him. And not only would he and his family be blessed – God promises that all families of the earth would be blessed through him! And Avram believed this voice he couldn't see, and acted on it. This is what Avram gets right – trusting in God by faith. He gets a lot wrong. But he believes God and that's all God wants.

That's what it means to walk by faith, to become accustomed to hearing the voice of the Spirit – which doesn't always come in words; sometimes it's in images or physical sensations in your body, or thoughts that appear in your mind that you don't think come from you, and cause you to go "Huh, why should I call my uncle?" That's what happened to a friend of mine – she had a strong sense one day to call her uncle. She hadn't talked to him in years; he and her father had had a falling out, and he'd cut off contact with her family. Why should she call her uncle? She kept trying to push it away, but the nudging got stronger, so finally she did. And it turned out it was his birthday, and he was alone; he was so glad she'd called; he had wanted to be reconciled to that side of the family. He died soon after, but they got together a few times, and healing happened.

The second movement of our series on how do we find our balance in this stressful and anxiety-ridden world is to learn to trust the voice of God. Hear it, trust it, walk in the way it leads. How do you hear the prompting of the Spirit? How does God work in you? I had a friend who used to get God messages in song lyrics that popped into her head. When have you sensed God telling you, pointing you, nudging you? I have felt strongly that I should have my mother come live with me in this final season of her life – she just wants family, but needs a lot of care. I am scared to death. But I believe, hope!, God is calling me forth; and God will be with me.

Know how God speaks to you, and then have the courage to step out. And tell someone else, especially if it's a big thing that you're discerning. "You know, I think God is saying I should quit my job and go help earthquake victims in Syria and Turkiye..." Well, that would be a very radical prompting. You would want others praying and discerning and confirming with you.

I had a friend in my church in New York; she was a nurse, having a great life – but during the Liberian civil war she felt a strong call to go to Liberia and help. She had no connection to Liberia, but the sense of call was strong. So she brought it to us, and we began to pray with her, and explore options. We felt a "yes" along with her, and began to raise funds – I sent out a bunch of letters to churches and organizations, and we raised \$60,000 in two months. That was just one of the many confirmations this was God's leading. The Anglican church there said, "Yes, please come, we need you," and you'll need a truck, and supplies... and within three months she had gone. She was there a few years, working with children orphaned during the war, and met her husband who was a relief worker and not religious – now they are both priests and he is in charge of global missions for the whole Episcopal Church. God had a whole lot of plans in that nudge!

There is a whole world going on around us all the time, this God-Life, a spiritual world, simultaneous to this reality, and sometimes affecting it. Our spiritual work as Christ-followers in this life, is to become equally able to function in this reality and God-reality at once. Our human operating system can leave us anxious; the God operating system offers peace if we will but trust it.

Ambrose of Milan, a bishop in the 4th century, wrote an instruction to the recently baptized, saying that they were to become “like fish.” *“Imitate the fish,” he says. “It is in the sea and above the waves. It is in the sea and swims on the waters. On the sea the tempest rages, violent winds blow; but the fish swims on. It does not drown because it is used to swimming. In the same way, this world is the sea for you. It has various currents, huge waves, fierce storms. You too must be a fish, so that the waves of this world do not drown you.”*

Being a fish means living by our God operating system, not the human one. That is how we live by faith instead of by anxiety. Learn to expect blessing. Global pandemics? Toxic political systems? Fluctuating markets? Expect blessing. We are invited into new life, to be born again by water and the Spirit. Are we ready like Abraham, to go where we can't see, trusting God's promises? As Paul wrote about him, *It depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants... in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*

We get to work with God to call into existence things that are not yet – hope, justice, healing, food enough for all, peace beyond understanding. Even now the things that do not exist are coming into view; How do you hear God calling you to help bring them forth?

Amen.

John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, **no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.**" 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?"

Jesus answered, "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. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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.

"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.

"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."

Genesis 12:1-8

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **I will bless those who bless you**, and the one who curses you I will curse; and **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"

Romans 4:1-5(6-12)13-17

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as

something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. [So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin."

Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.]

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") -- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.