

March 5, 2023

John 3:1-17

“Reading the Classics: Sovereign Love”

Would it be possible for us to consider a more familiar text? Perhaps Psalm 23. But in truth most of this text isn't all that familiar – mostly just verse 16. People who don't care about faith know this verse. It is everywhere.

So, how shall we approach it? Well, let's start with the cast. We are familiar with Jesus - except that in John's Gospel Jesus has a little different appearance than in the other Gospels. There is much more focus on who Jesus is in this Gospel. All of the “I am” sayings are from here. Nicodemus is introduced saying Jesus must be from God because of his miracles. Nicodemus character fades fast from then on. He asks questions and doesn't understand the answers. He should remind us, at least a little, of ourselves. ***We live on a journey of faith and time and again we learn things about God or life with God and then in relatively short order have to learn them again.*** The good news is that Jesus keeps talking: to Nicodemus and to us. I find that encouraging.

There is a lot more to this passage than the part written in neon. For example, *the Kingdom of God* is central to this passage. Being born of water and the spirit is what enables us to perceive and enter the kingdom. People disagree over exactly how to interpret the water – but the spirit is God's. This is key to everything else. ***All the important actions are done by God.*** This is not a matter of being smart enough to find God – “Whew! That was lucky!” It is about receiving God's gift of life by the spirit.

So, let me ask you – does anyone here remember being born? In some ways it might be kind of awful if we did. We did not, by force of will or religious genius get ourselves born. The same is true with being born from above. Jesus invites Nicodemus to stretch to the reality of God which is waiting for him. ***Too often we have imagined this was Jesus giving Nicodemus an ultimatum – believe or else.*** Instead, let's imagine Jesus' invitation to an earnest, worried, hesitant disciple. “Let God work in you so much you are no longer worried about who knows if you are speaking with me or not.” He is after all, there under cover of darkness.

And what's all that stuff ***about the wind and the spirit?*** Of course belief is a crucial part of our life as brothers and sisters of Jesus. But do we control it? Is

there any scenario in which we trade places with and take over the power of God? Not a chance.

We need to take seriously that when Jesus was teaching it was radical to say “**Whosoever**” anything. People were placed in baskets of acceptability and there was very little ability to move from one basket to the other. Belief was fine – but it really had to be *the right kind of person doing the believing*. This is why I love the angel visitation to the shepherds so much at Christmas. They are considered less than “nobody” and God considers them “somebody.”

This context, a reluctant admirer coming at night to preserve his reputation is crucial for getting the good news of this passage. I read the thoughts of a woman theologian this past week who had an interesting take on all this birth talk. In her view, Nicodemus has been gestating in faith – is ready to be born – but doesn’t want to come out of the womb. So, God is pushing...like a woman who has had nine months of pregnancy and is ready to be done. Encouraging Nicodemus to come through the spiritual birth canal to come out into the light of day as one who has discovered God’s life in Jesus.

For God so loved the world...*that God created it*. For God so loved the world that *God created people* to live in it. For God so loved the world that *God became one of us* to redeem the race that had rebelled from its creator. For God so loved the world that *God gave us a way to live this life and get back home to God by through spiritual power*. The dimensions of this story and passage are far and wide – we don’t want to miss any of them.

The emphasis in our faith tradition this points to is called “**The Sovereignty of God.**” It means that God long ago chose to love us and we don’t manipulate God into caring. It means we don’t have the power to make God do anything – but the good news is **God wants to do** what we need. God’s sovereign love redeems us when we could never redeem ourselves.

Our faith, our trust in God who is beyond our ability to reason has always been the gift of God. The fix is in – God didn’t send the son to condemn but to save. Thanks be to God.