

“Born From Above by Water and the Spirit”

Scripture: Exodus John 3:1-17

Rev. Rob Spach

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In the passage we just heard from the Gospel of John, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night in a respectful and open way: “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.”

Nicodemus has drawn a conclusion about Jesus based on signs and miracles. And he’s not wrong. The signs point toward God’s presence. But for Jesus, that is only scratching the surface. To follow him because he performs miracles is to misunderstand who he truly is.

In the opening chapter of John’s Gospel, we’re told that Jesus is the *Logos*—the Word, the purpose, the very meaning of the universe—made flesh. He hasn’t come to impress people with wonders, nor simply to fix people’s problems with a political agenda, nor even to offer what we sometimes reduce to “a ticket to heaven.” He has come to proclaim and embody the reign of God. So, Jesus answers Nicodemus in a way that seems to come out of nowhere: “I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born *anōthen*.”

That Greek word—*anōthen*—means both “again” and “from above.” Nicodemus hears it in the most literal, earthly way: “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born again?” But Jesus is speaking of something else: being *born from above*. Jesus continues: “I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and wind.” Here Jesus again uses a Greek word, *pneuma*, which can mean two things, either wind or spirit.

Nicodemus hears “water” and thinks of ritual washing. John’s early readers would have thought of spiritual cleansing and the identity as God’s beloved child conferred in baptism. Nicodemus hears “wind” and thinks of moving air. But then Jesus uses the word *pneuma* in both senses. “The *pneuma*, the wind, blows where it chooses,” Jesus says, “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 *pneuma*, the Spirit.”

Birth, water, wind—these earthly things are signs pointing toward heavenly realities in which God is active. Being born—whether from a woman’s womb or from above—is something that happens to a person. Likewise, being born of water and Spirit is a result of God’s initiative, drawing us into God’s reign.

So, what is this “kingdom of God” Jesus talking about? The scholar Francis Moloney observes, “[T]he expression ‘the kingdom of God’ comes to [John’s] gospel from earlier Christian tradition. In that tradition Jesus often speaks of the kingdom as a present reality ... The kingdom of God refers to a community of believers” who live by a vision and a set of values taught and embodied by Jesus (*The Gospel of John*, p. 93).

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And what are those values? In God’s reign the poor are blessed, prisoners set free. The meek and the peacemakers are lifted up. The foreigner is gathered under the canopy of divine mercy. God makes the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. And there are woes for those who live comfortably while ignoring the needs and suffering of their fellow human beings, especially the most vulnerable.

To see that kingdom in our midst requires more than religious knowledge. As N. T. Wright puts it, “The Judaism that Nicodemus and Jesus both knew had a good deal to do with being born into the right family. What mattered was being a child of Abraham. ... Now, Jesus is saying, God is starting a new family in which this ordinary birth isn’t enough. You need to be born all over again, ‘from above’.” (*John for Everyone, Part 1*, p. 29). That’s how one is swept up into a new family whose defining mark is not community of origin but trust in—and allegiance to—Jesus and his way.

Then comes the verse many of us learned as children: “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.” Notice the scope: the world. Not a select few. Not the morally superior. Not the religiously correct. The world. God’s love is expansive, deep, and sure.

In John’s Gospel, “believe” does not mean simply agreeing to a list of doctrines. The Greek root *pistis* suggests trust, faithfulness, commitment. To believe in the Son is to entrust ourselves to him, to give our loyalty to his vision of God’s reign. In Jesus’ words, it is to have eternal life. Eternal life here doesn’t mean merely life after death. It means that the eternal things of God—God’s justice, mercy, truth, and love—take root in us here and now. Eternal life suggests an earthly existence informed by heaven’s values, the very values that shape the borderless community in which we encounter the kingdom of God. As Moloney has observed, “most commentators affirm that [in John’s] gospel the traditional term ‘kingdom of God’ is to be identified with eternal life” (p. 98).

So, what might this eternal life, this “birth from above, by water and the Spirit” into the kingdom of God, look like in our own time? Given the everlasting values that shape the reign of God, I encourage each of us to take a minute and think about the news we read every day, the words and actions taken by leaders in all walks of society, the legislation proposed and passed by our elected representatives. Where do we see God’s eternal values, the vision of God’s reign, articulated and embodied, and where do we *not* see them championed and manifested?

Where we see exclusion or avarice or racism or violence or judgmentalism as being thought of as dimensions of what God wants in our world, maybe we need to ask for the Spirit of Jesus to move in our midst

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and in us, to birth us anew, from above, to reaffirm our baptism, into an identity that recognizes everyone as God’s beloved. The Spirit still blows where it will. Sometimes it comforts us. Sometimes it unsettles us. Sometimes it carries us beyond what we thought possible, rushing like a mighty wind bringing justice and righteousness to our world, our nation, our streets, our homes, our hearts.

That is what Jesus was trying to get across to Nicodemus that night. This text is both affirmation and invitation. Affirmation, because the kingdom Jesus proclaims is indeed a community where the last are first, where barriers fall, where love refuses to narrow its reach. Invitation, because none of us ever graduates from the need to be born from above, to have our imaginations reshaped so that we can see the kingdom of God already breaking in among us—and to offer our lives to God so that they can be aligned with the kingdom’s upside-down values.

May we long to be born from above, by water and Spirit, so that we can see the kingdom of God in our midst—and so that we have eternal life. Not tomorrow. Not only after death. But here, and now, in this world into which God sent his Son, not to condemn it, but so that the world might be saved through him. Amen.