

RedLetters | The Sermons of Jesus (2024)

Light Has Come into the World

John 2.23 – 3.22

January 28, 2023

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, ²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees¹, named Nicodemus², a ruler of the Jews³;² this man came to Jesus by night⁴ and said⁵ to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

*⁴ Nicodemus *said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?”⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the Light and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. ²² After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.

This “Season of the Son” between Advent and Easter is where we usually look at the life and work of Jesus Christ in *The Four Gospels*. THIS year we’re following that plan by reading the major discourses, speeches, and sermons of Jesus in *John’s Gospel* (we’ll skip the longest speech of ALL [CH 13-17] *The Upper Room Discourse*; having covered it last year).

THIS is the famous dialogue between Jesus and a *man* (Jesus “*knew what was IN man*”...THIS man), a *Pharisee* (ultra-orthodox, fundamentalists and flatterers), a *ruler of the Jews* (a judge, one of the “truth-police” for society). He *came by night* because he doesn’t want people to get the wrong idea (he doesn’t want to identify as a follower of Jesus; “what would people say?”) Lastly, Nicodemus conducts an *interview* to see if this “*Rabbi*” is legit and may have a future in the Jerusalem ministerial association.

Today we look more closely at one key word in this famous dialogue: faith (noun) or believe (verb) -- same root in Greek.

“*That whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” What does it mean to believe, to have faith? How do you know if you HAVE faith? When Jesus says that being born from above is THE necessary condition for entrance into God’s Kingdom AND that believing is THE indicator that one IS born from above, what IS it that we’re believing? We use that word A LOT, but do we know what we’re saying? We take for granted that we know what faith IS and that we’ve believed but... what IS faith?

This passage points to three motions or directions as the source, the sense and the result of believing:

- 1) **The DOWN and Up that God Does Alone**
- 2) **The GIVE and Take that God and We Do Together**
- 3) **The OUT and In that We Do With One Another**

Christian theologians talk about the “*Two Books of God*”, i.e., the book of creation and the book of Scripture. And Jesus began His words to Nicodemus by appealing to the Book of Nature or Creation when He compared spiritual life to physical or natural birth. As a physical birth from a human mother makes a member of the human race so also a spiritual birth, a birth from above, makes us a member of the New Humanity, members of the Kingdom of God.

Then, Jesus Christ refers again to the *Book of Nature* and He shows how much powerless we are to control or even understand God’s Spirit and the New Birth: The Spirit is about as knowable or controllable as the natural phenomenon we call, “*the wind*”. We don’t know the source, or the destination of the wind AND we can’t control the wind – so with the Spirit. He’s mysterious, wild, uncontrollable and irresistible as the wind.

But these “*earthly things*” have their limits. We can easily draw the wrong conclusions from nature. Creation is good and reliable, a billion pointers to God... IF we can read those pointers... BUT... we can’t (Rom 1.18ff). We’re fallen and our thinking is twisted... our “*God-receptors*” are dead so we can’t reason our way UP to God. We can’t ASCEND with our minds to figure out how God is. (see Romans 1; Psalm 19).

This is why... there are so many religions and spiritual and moral approaches and why we can’t agree which (if any) is True. It all comes down to peoples’ opinions because... no one has been there... No one has gone up to God... All we have is a seemingly infinite number of guesses.

But Jesus makes an astounding claim asserting His own uniqueness: *“No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.”* Referring to Himself, He says, “All opinions and all approaches, all attempts to figure out how it all works FAIL because no one has actually been in the immediate presence of God. YOU, teacher of Israel, can’t even SEE HOW GOD IS AND HOW HE RULES THE UNIVERSE because you’ve never been to heaven... but now, in Me, heaven has come down.”

“I am the Mind of God embodied in humanity. I am the LOGOS (1.1 & 14), the Word, the unique expression of God’s very Heart and I am sitting with you... while you judge Me.”

You know I’ve heard people quip: “Christianity isn’t a religion it’s a relationship.” And I get that...but I’d rather say, “Christianity isn’t a religion it’s a revelation.”

In Jesus Christ, God came among us. He revealed God to us. John the Gospel-writer put it this way in the introduction to this book: *“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known”*. (1.18 NIV)

All religion is an unsuccessful attempt to get to God but in Jesus Christ, God came DOWN to us.

But I titled this first point, “The Down AND UP that God Does Alone.” Without help from us, God came down to us in Jesus AND THEN He went UP for us too.

His moment of greatest glory, according to John’s Gospel, is when He was lifted up on The Cursed Tree. We looked briefly at this last week, this mysterious reference to a sort of obscure episode in Israel’s history. In *The Book of Numbers*, CH 21, only six verses long, this odd story about the wandering Israelites, even after they’d seen God do miracles to save, protect and sustain them, they had burning venom on their tongues and grumbled against God even suggesting that God wanted to kill them.

So, God sends “fiery serpents” among them and the burning venom killed some of the Israelites. They cry out to God for healing and God tells Moses to make a metal snake... a symbol of their sin and of the source of death that plagued them. Moses was told to lift up the bronze serpent on a pole... those who looked to the metal snake were healed... BUT a patient had to actually LOOK up and see it in order to be healed.

It looks like voodoo... sympathetic magic. Even modern Jewish scholars don’t know what to do with it. Some say it was a later addition because it has NOTHING TO DO WITH JUDAISM... it’s patently PAGAN! And it sat there IN the Torah for 1,500 years, an embarrassment UNTIL Jesus Christ CLAIMED it as a picture of His work. Being lifted up, a symbol of everything that’s wrong with the world – that willingness, that act of Jesus IS the pinnacle of His glory.

Together, the COMING down of God in Jesus Christ AND the lifting up of Jesus for the sins of everyone who LOOK to Him – THESE MOVES, down and up, are THE Crux of Christianity’s uniqueness.

In Jesus, God came down to us. In Jesus, God went up on to the altar, on the Cursed Tree. God became the emblem of our sickness. "His appearance was marred more than any man..." (Isa 52.14) It's the greatest act of love to ever take place – the moment of Jesus Christ's glory and the purpose for His coming... for everyone who, as in Moses' day, LOOKS to the symbol of our sickness... LOOKS to Jesus Christ on the Cross and says, "THAT is my only hope!"

Of course, after God came down in Jesus Christ and after Jesus was lifted up the symbol of our sin and the cure... God the Spirit raised Him and Jesus was lifted up again, over death. He takes our humanity INTO the Presence of the Majesty on High... and there He stands in my place me (as if I myself were perfectly innocent and holy) and there He prays for everyone who looks to Him.

In Jesus, God came down and made Himself known. In Jesus God went up to take the blame that I deserved and then "Up from the Grave He Arose" ... And in response to this glorious act of self-giving love, God the Spirit is sent down on all Nations. He brings people from death to life into this new creation by a new birth from above. God does it by Himself... with no help from the dead (i.e., US).

The second movement or direction (this time involving God AND US) is Giving and Receiving. God gives. We receive... That's what faith feels like. "God loved the world so much that He gave..." Love is basically synonymous with GIVING. And faith is the organ of reception; believing is to faith what breathing is to lungs.

God, the Spirit, makes dead people alive to God. He puts lungs in us and then calls us to breathe. It may happen at first very dramatically... or this breathing may happen imperceptibly... very gradually a person may realize (and THIS was, I THINK the case with Nicodemus and with many from our congregation). A person realizes, "I don't know when it started but... some time... I started believing."

It's like a conception... it happens in darkness... in secret, in the depths (Ps 139.15-16)...mystery. BUT eventually the child comes OUT... The baby is born, breathes, cries, eats and all the other things babies do. That breathing is what faith looks like and feels like.

The Christian life... the life of faith is all about God having what we need... GOD giving that TO us and OUR receiving.

He gives us His only begotten Son. He's the cure for our sickness, our sin and guilt. We're not looking to Jesus as the world's religions look to their founders and leaders. We look to Him NOT so much as a teacher or guide or guru but as a Savior who came DOWN to us in our mess.

We're looking to Jesus Christ as the Israelites looked to the snake on the pole – He's our Cure, our Oxygen and the Lungs of Faith BREATHE Him in; we BELIEVE Him in.

We need Him today...like we need oxygen today. We breathe again and again and so we believe in Him; we rest on and receive Him again and again.

We sometimes make arbitrary tests for God's love... "If I get a tax return... it'll prove that God loves me... if I pass this test...get into this college program... get a parking space... get this guy to love me... if my baby stops crying..." But it doesn't say, "God so loved the world that He gave a promotion... or an 'A' on a test but His most precious gift... loved from eternity (without beginning or end) ... He gave and we keep on receiving. That's how we know we're loved - we receive His Gift again and again.

Lastly – ALONE God came down and went up... together WITH us, God gives and we keep on receiving and LAST, there's a COMING OUT and a GOING IN.

"But he who practices the truth comes into the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God." It implies an open, honest, reception of the whole Way that Jesus Christ is.

It means leaving the darkness of pretense, self-deception, self-justification. It means leaving the religious people-centered system of cronyism where you feel good about yourself because others flatter you or respect you.

It means facing the spiritual trauma that YOU ARE NOT OK and that soooooo much of your effort is devoted to convincing others and God and yourself that you ARE ok. But you come out... you begin to trust that the One who really matters has weighed you in the balances and found you WANTING – you don't measure up... AND NONE of the people you've EVER known have measured up.

And... you adopt that as HALF OF your self-image: "I am NOT a good person (i.e., I have NOT done what God requires) and the fact is I'm more messed up than I even realize... B U T there's another half to that "living in the light" self-image and THAT IS, "Though I am broken beyond repair and have broken all God's Laws... YET because of Jesus Christ coming down, going up and God's love that I receive in these New (God-Given) Lungs... I am now forgiven and counted righteous in God's sight! I'm seated (ALREADY!) with Christ in the Presence of God!"

And even though I've lived my whole life successfully fooling others... showing the symbols of goodness and success and convincing others that I have it together... I've now heard the voice of Jesus saying, *"Truly, Truly"* ("Remember my paraphrase?) Jesus is saying, *"Quit foolin' around and face who you are... that You need a cure that morality or partying or success or coolness can't give."*

And when I GET that... not once but every day and many times each day... when I get it, I start to be much less focused on appearance. I become less concerned about peoples' expectations.

I start to be very open about my failings ("appropriate vulnerability"). Coming into the light requires radical honesty. It's very difficult; in fact, impossible for religious people like Nicodemus! I'm increasingly uncomfortable judging others on the basis of their appearances... I assume that people (even those who seem to have it together!... maybe especially them!) I assume that people are ALL messed up – no matter what their appearance.

And more and more I start obeying God and loving Him and others NOT to meet people's expectations but because the Spirit of God is sweetly compelling me to do so... This is what Jesus meant in the closing words about deeds wrought in God – not wrought or worked to please people but because God is pleased with me...

AND this kind of living... often feels like ... crucifixion... I'm sure it did for Nicodemus the Flatterer as he began to believe.

It reminds me of Eustace Scrubb (in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C.S. Lewis). He was a selfish little boy who somehow came upon a dragon's lair filled with treasure. Eustace helped himself... greedily taking all he could carry until his own true nature came out... he turned into a dragon.

He tried to shed the scales, but it didn't work. Then in his despair, he saw the Lion Aslan who offered to help. Here's how Eustace later told the story:

Then the lion said... You will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know—if you've ever picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts like crazy—oh but it is such fun to see it coming away...

Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobby-looking than the other (attempts) had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing, I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turn into a boy again.

In reality... we don't turn back into boys and girls, but we are transformed from glory into glory... Coming into the light of radical honesty hurts... but crucifixion leads to resurrection and repentance leads to joy.