

Lent 2011 at Brentwood Presbyterian

Born of the Spirit

March 20, 2011

**Psalm 121 & John 3:1-17
(Hymns – 381, 386, 394, 768)**

The Reception of New Members – Arthur Ling

This passage from John
That we read this morning
contains one of the most quoted verses of Scripture
in the history of the church in North America.
It comes is the 16th verse – John 3:16.
Those of us who are sports fans
will remember the guy in the bright rainbow afro wig
who used to sit in the stands with a big sign saying “John 3:16”
throughout the late 1970s and 1980s.
It is a powerful verse in expressing God’s intent
in becoming flesh in Jesus Christ:

*For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.*

That is one of the great summary verses in Scripture.
It captures in a few words
much of the rich meaning of the Christian faith.

What I want to do this morning is put that verse back into its context
in the whole section of John’s Gospel that we read this morning.
Let’s explore further what this passage from John teaches us
about flourishing in the grace of Jesus Christ.

First, this is yet another encounter with the religious experts and authorities
who want to challenge Jesus’ teaching.
The Pharisees were teachers who were experts in Jewish Law.
They had the backing and good will of the common people,
In contrast to the Saducees, who were more elitist in their self-understanding,
the Pharisees advocated a strict adherence to the Law
in order to keep the Jewish people
distinct and separate from Greek and Roman influences.
They resisted assimilation into the surrounding culture.
Some scholars suggest that Jesus’ was trained as a Pharisee
because of his grasp of the Law and its real intent.

Jesus, of course, was an innovator rather than a preserver.
He was a critic of the way in which the Pharisees interpreted the Law.

He does not reject the law.

He comes to teach and model the true meaning of the Law
as a means of understanding the relationship God desires with us.

There was a very real sense in which the Pharisees
had made the Law their God.

God was experienced only in a strict adherence to the Law,
not through the love of God that had led to the giving of the Law in the first place.

And in that strict adherence to the Law, as Jesus saw it practiced in his time,
the Pharisees had lost touch with its loving, saving purpose,
as a means of reconciling people with God, with others, and with themselves.

I think it is the recovery of this deep meaning of the Law
that lies at the heart of this exchange with Nicodemus,
acknowledged by Jesus as a great teacher in Israel.

It is this deep meaning of the Law,
the *shalom* or well-being or flourishing
that fills relationships in the kingdom of God.
that Jesus is witnessing to in this encounter.

He begins his responses to Nicodemus
by referring yet again to the kingdom of God.
So this whole conversation is about the kingdom
and how we understand living in the kingdom with God.
It's about becoming a citizen of that kingdom.

It's about acknowledging Jesus as Lord,
as the first and foremost citizen of the kingdom,
the *prime* or first *minister* or servant of this quality of life.
Being a citizen of the kingdom of God is enjoyed when we believe
that God has given us eternal life in Jesus Christ
and live accordingly.

That was the real intent of the Law and that's what Jesus is teaching.

And remember, when John uses the phrase *eternal life*,
he is not referring simply to a time dimension,
but to a quality of life in companionship with God
that is enjoyed here and now.

We enter into this kingdom that already exists in this life
through the work of God's Spirit as it leads us into the full richness of belief.

This quality of sight, this way of seeing, this understanding of belief,
is not possible without God's help.

Indeed, it is a gift from God.

Without this gift, no one can enter the kingdom of God.

Without this way of seeing life, no one can be a citizen
in the kingdom of God.

Without being born again to this new understanding,
without being filled in every dimension of your being with this Spirit,
no one can overcome death and enjoy eternal life.

Because Jesus has been with God in the kingdom,
and with the Holy Spirit in the kingdom,
from creation on,
he understands the true intent of God,
the true purpose of the Law.

Being born of the Spirit
brings us into a reconciled relationship with God in Jesus Christ
that changes our lives,
that gives us a new birth as redeemed people,
seeing things from God's perspective and with God's intent.
Our lives are now focused on loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves
as beloved witnesses to God amazing grace intended for everyone.

The way into the kingdom of God is an encounter with the Holy Spirit
through which we come to believe in what God has done for all the earth
in Jesus Christ.

This God has come to save, not to judge.
He has come to give life, not to inflict death.
He has come to offer eternal flourishing, not continuous suffering.
We are born again when we see things differently,
through God's eyes,
through God's intent that everyone should be saved
by becoming citizens of God's kingdom of *shalom*.

Jesus is the teacher, in word and deed,
of what flourishing in that kingdom feels like for everyone.
It is God who brings us into that kingdom through the work of the Holy Spirit.

And we, who are we in this whole process?
First, we are joyful recipients of this rebirth.
But there is more.
We are witnesses to the power of the kingdom of God
and mid-wives assisting in the birth of new Christians
as people respond to our invitations to become citizens of God's kingdom.
That's what it means to be born of the Spirit.