

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Dayton, Ohio

October 23, 2022
Richard Baker

What Are You Here To Do? Part I: Become Human

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again from above.”—John 3:3

Psalm 16:5-11; John 2:23-3:16

"Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection."—Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man," *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966)

Good people will do good things, and bad people will do evil things, but for good people to do evil things— that takes religion.—Steven Weinberg, Nobel laureate in Physics

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.—Ezekiel 36:25-26

First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 16:5-11

[Following Tori and Drew Statt’s winning Minute for Stewardship] What could possibly be left for me to say after *that*? “Lord, help me”—really, *that* should be my prayer for illumination. But I’ll expand it a little: Will you pray with me?

Lord, help *us* to hear your Word today, so that we might grow in our faith and have fullness of life. Amen.

Our first Scripture Lesson is—yes, once again—Psalm 16 from the Old Testament, the Book of Psalms. How did you put it, Drew?—“so much wonderful and incredible repetition”—Exactly. But this week, as you hear Psalm 16 again, listen for God’s gift of life to us—as in our Stewardship hymn [*What Gift Can We Bring?*], it’s a gift for the past, present, and future. Listen now for God’s Word to us:

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night, my heart instructs me.

I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;

my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Second Scripture Lesson: John 2:23-3:16

In John's Gospel, Jesus' miracles, the wondrous things he does—changing water into wine, healing the sick, walking on water, feeding the five thousand, giving sight to the blind—all of these are called “signs.” And with that term comes a pressing question: What is the significance of these “signs”? What do they mean? What do they point to? And in particular what do they say about who and what Jesus is?

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest governing body of the Jewish people. Even this early in Jesus' ministry, the Sanhedrin is already suspicious of, and hostile towards, Jesus. So when Nicodemus comes to Jesus, he comes at night. What is he there to do? To let Jesus know that he at least does understand the significance of these signs, he knows who and what Jesus is. But as you'll see, Nicodemus has a few surprises in store for him. Listen for God's Word to us, the Gospel of John, Chapters 2 and 3:

When Jesus was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, for he himself knew what was in everyone.

Now 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 again from above.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can someone 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 again 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.”

Sermon

My dog, Jersey? He’s worried . . . about me. You see, sometimes, when I take him on his nightly walk through South Park, I put on my headphones and listen to “my” podcasts, some of which are about contemporary politics, almost all of which bemoan the state of our contemporary politics. It’s on those nights that Jersey gets worried.

You see, often the podcasters say things like this:

“The arrogant and hateful partisanship that has come to define our politics, the contemptuous cruelty towards those who disagree, those on the other side—why it’s gotten to be like a religion.”

Or like this:

“The willful and perverse ignorance that has come to define our politics, the self-righteous refusal to listen to opposing points of view, or consider contrary evidence, or even consider evidence at all, you know it’s getting to be a lot like a religion.”

Or this:

“The blind and reckless allegiances that have come to define our politics, the mindless enthrallment to charismatic, corrupt and corrupting leaders—it’s like a religion.”

It’s then that I begin to shout:

“Stop it! Just stop it, will you!! Why do you keep assuming that religion is the low standard for arrogant partisanship, willful ignorance, and blind allegiances? That’s not the religion that I know, and it’s certainly not the people of religious faith, the church and the church people, that I know and love—Not. At. All. And by the way it seems to me that our politics is doing a pretty good job of setting that low standard all on its own without any reference to religion at all. In fact, it seems to me that our politics might be a whole lot better off if it were more like the church and the church people I know and love—SO THERE!!! HARRUUMPH!!!!”

And it's then that Jersey looks up at me with canine concern, "You know, I'm supposed to be the one howling at the moon."

And he's right: howling doesn't do me any good. And besides, truth be told, there's a simple reason religion is seen as setting that low bar. . . . It's because . . . Well, it's because it has, it's been like that. It's true: too often—far too often—religion has been defined by arrogant partisanship, willful ignorance, and blind allegiances. As the saying goes: "Good people will do good things, and bad people will do evil things, but for good people to do evil things—that takes religion."

And the best way I can explain this is to appeal to a piece of ancient wisdom, one that is as true today as it ever was: "The best things, when corrupted, become the very worst." In other words: for something to go really, really bad, it has to have had the potential to be really, really good in the first place.

I could give a lot of examples, but the best one I can give is well . . . us, us, human beings.

It is us—we human beings: we were made in the image of God, God's final and greatest accomplishment, the crown jewel and caretakers of all creation, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, we were made to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.

And it is us—we human beings: we deface the image of God in ourselves and others, debase ourselves lower than any other creature, and threaten to destroy all creation. "An evil and corrupt generation," Jesus called us. Or as Huck Finn puts it, "it's enough to make a body ashamed of the human race."

What a piece of work is man: the glory of the universe. What a piece of work is man: the glory and the garbage of the universe.—Blaise Pascal

We can see this duality, this division, this disconnect, all around us, all the time. But it becomes especially evident in times of crisis, when social constraints are lifted: in wartime, for example, you can see the most magnificent acts of bravery, compassion, and selfless grandeur right alongside the worst acts of cowardice, cruelty, and selfish meanness.

But you can see it in everyday life too: in the ways we use our God-given gifts—gifts of thought and speech, passion and action, individual initiative and cooperative effort. We can—and have—used these uniquely human gifts to achieve great ends. And we can—and have—misused them to the worst possible ends. And we continue to do so. Have you looked at our politics lately?

And of course, if we're honest, we can see it in ourselves, too. We are, in the words of Kenneth Burke, "rotten with perfection"—a perfect phrase to describe this duality.

And so also our religion. Our desire to live in solidarity with our fellow human beings, our longing to know and live by the truth, our readiness to give our allegiances to, to give our very selves to, something greater than ourselves—these are truly religious and truly good impulses—

the best, in fact. But when misdirected, disordered, and corrupted, they can become the worst: arrogant partisanship, willful ignorance and blind allegiances.

The best things when corrupted become the very worst.

Which is why so many people in our day, I think, say they don't like institutional religion, or party politics for that matter. They see the corruptions, especially in light of the professed ideals (religious teachings, the life of Jesus; our constitutional and civic traditions)—and the distance, the disconnect, the chasm—not to mention the hypocrisy—disgusts them. Me too.

But the fault lies not in our institutions—religious, political, or otherwise; Nor does it lie in our stars—it's not inevitable. No, the fault lies closer to home. The fault—this duality, this division, this disconnect—lies in ourselves.

Which is why Jesus says what he says to Nicodemus; because Nicodemus, too, is rotten with perfection.

Nicodemus thinks he's there to reassure Jesus, to tell Jesus that someone gets it, that he gets it, that at least he understands what the miracles mean, he sees the significance of the signs: they mean that Jesus is a great prophet, and like all the great prophets, he is sent by God.

And in response? Jesus says to him, "you need to be born again from above."

Which is probably *not* the response Nicodemus was expecting. And you can tell because Nicodemus, responds with "Huh? How's that gonna work?" He's thinking of physical rebirth, of course. But Jesus is speaking of spiritual rebirth: he means the healing of our fault—the healing of that duality, that division, that disconnect—within Nicodemus and within us all.

And Jesus himself—more than a prophet, in fact, the one to whom all the prophets were pointing, Jesus himself, the one who will be lifted up—lifted up on cross and then lifted up into heaven—Jesus himself is the one who brings the Spirit and will send the Holy Spirit.

And the Spirit will bring that healing, that rebirth, which in truth is a lifelong process. Jesus himself is the one who makes Nicodemus— and us—fit to see and to enter the kingdom of heaven, to be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect. That is who and what he is.

Which is why this church needs to be here and why we need to support it: as a witness to Him.

As a witness so that this rebirth can take place. As a witness that religion can be, what in was meant to be, a good thing, one fo the best things. As a witness that we can become fully human as we were meant to be: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you."

As a witness that we can have life, and fullness of life, pleasures forevermore. As a witness to God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. That is why the church needs to be here and we need to support it.

Now, please: don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that this rebirth can take place only within the walls of this church or any church for that matter. Nor am I saying that this rebirth is limited only to those who openly profess Jesus. I am not lapsing back into arrogant partisanship, willful ignorance, and blind allegiances. Not at all:

“What is born of the Spirit is spirit. 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.” Or, as Jesus also said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them in also.”

But what I am saying is that we all need to be born again from above. And God promises that one place that it can happen—one place that it will happen—is here in this church. The church is a witness.

And by the way, speaking of witnesses . . . Nicodemus?

Later in John's Gospel when the Sanhedrin is investigating Jesus, Nicodemus stands up and defends Jesus—at least on procedural grounds: he deserves a fair hearing. And later, after Jesus is crucified, Nicodemus—in broad daylight now—shows up with a wheelbarrow full of costly spices to put on Jesus' body for burial. Being born again from above is a lifelong process, but Nicodemus is making progress.

And speaking of making progress, now, Drew, thanks to you, I know what I'm up here to do. I'm supposed to, in your words, “wrap it all up in a giant theological metaphor, so that the congregation can stew on it for the next several days, thinking about the deeper existential meaning.” I mean that's what you said, right? OK, So here goes:

“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.”

And for that Drew, Can I get a witness? [Amen]

That is what we are here to do: be a witness. Everyone now, can I get a witness? [Amen.]

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.