

Mysteries of Our Faith

We humans have been trying to figure out the mysteries of our faith for thousands of years. The writer of Psalm 8 looked up at the night sky and asked “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Isn’t it interesting that the psalmist somehow sensed he or she was cared for? But then, isn’t that where our belief in God comes from? That there is some benevolent being or creative force in the universe that is at once beyond us, and ever-present with us? No wonder the psalmist begins his psalm by exclaiming, I would guess aloud, “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

That’s all Nicodemus was trying to do in this morning’s passage—trying to understand the mysteries of our faith. Mysteries like who Jesus is, who God is, what difference faith makes in our lives. And as we just heard, Jesus takes him on a roller-coaster ride of esoteric statements that I still don’t completely understand today. Even after reading a bunch of commentaries. So we can hardly fault Nicodemus for being a little bit thick.

One of the problems is that human language has always been limited. Take Jesus’ first words to Nicodemus. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” First of all, what in the world is “the kingdom of God?” And second, what does it mean to “be born from above?” This was even more difficult for Nicodemus than it is for us, because John’s Jesus uses a Greek word, *anōthen*, that can have two different meanings. It can mean “again,” or it can mean “from above.” Either way, if you take it literally, you’re going to get stuck. Nicodemus got stuck on the first meaning and didn’t even make it to the second. How can someone be born again? Aren’t we born only once? And then we’re pretty much stuck with who we are and what we have?

In the Bible study this past Wednesday evening, I asked the group what they thought of when they heard the phrase “born again.” Of course the first thing they thought of was revival meetings, commitment calls, evangelical Christianity, the religious right, the moral majority, and people such as Chuck Colson, who went to prison and then made a killing on his book entitled “Born Again.” But once the group got past that, the answers got a little more interesting. One person said that for her, being born again meant becoming a new person, as opposed to the “old person” they used to be. Someone else said that for him, being born again meant getting a new or fresh start. It’s like, you’re still the same person, you just get a second chance.

I am reminded of last Sunday when Earl Wallace told us his story, of how he grew up on the streets, and eventually was sent to prison for a variety of felonies. But while he was in prison he had a series of remarkable experiences, that led him to turn his life around by turning it over to God. I don’t know, Blue—it sounds like you’ve been born again! Or at the very least, you’ve been given a fresh start.

So how does such a dramatic rebirth or fresh start happen? This brings us to our next mystery of the faith. And once again we have to feel a bit sorry for Nicodemus. Because

Jesus uses another Greek word that has a double meaning: the word *pneuma*. As in the *pneuma* of God. This word can mean “wind,” as in the “wind of God.” Or, it can mean “spirit,” and thus the “spirit of God.” Either way, you can’t see it. You can feel it. You can see its effects. But you can’t see “it.”

We’ve had an awful lot of *pneuma* in Kansas this past week. A *pneuma* so strong and relentless that it fanned small fires into large ones, burning buildings, killing cattle, turning lives upside down. Does that sound like the spirit of God? Not the first two; but turning lives upside down does!

According to Jesus, there are two ways of being born, and if we want to see the kingdom of God, not to mention enter it, we have to experience both. We have to be born of the flesh, or water (literally our mother’s water). And we have to be born of the spirit, specifically God’s spirit. A spirit we can’t see, but can only feel. We can see its effects (like we did in Blue’s story last week), but we can’t see it. Neither can we predict it. We don’t know when this spirit will come. We don’t know where it will come from and where it will go. Jesus says that this kind of spirit or wind or *pneuma* can only come from above. Which is another way of saying from heaven. Which is another way of saying from God.

Which brings us to a third mystery of the faith, namely heaven. Otherwise known as the “kingdom of heaven.” It’s all around us. But we can’t see it. At least, not directly. We can only see its effects. You can’t point to it, and say “there is the kingdom of heaven.” You can only point to its effects. Neither can we say very well what the kingdom of heaven is; we can only say what it is like. Which is why Jesus often said when he was teaching, “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .” such and such. And this is also why he asked Nicodemus, “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” As if it exists in another dimension, or perhaps IS another dimension

Which brings us to a fourth mystery of the faith. If a fresh start or new life or the kingdom of heaven is the “what,” and the Holy Spirit is the “how,” then what about the “why?” Why does the Holy Spirit sometimes move in such dramatic ways? The answer comes in verse 16: it’s because of love. “For God so loved the world.” It’s the same love, the same “being cared for,” that the writer of Psalm 8 sensed. Only now that love has been revealed to the universe in a new way. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” It’s as if God was saying to the world, “You want to see what love, and in particular my love, looks like? I’ll show you. First, my Son will come into your world, and travel around, teaching and healing. And then, just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of God be lifted up.” And once again we have a confounded Greek word that can have two meanings. The word is *hupsoskeinai*. And it can mean “to be exalted.” And it can also mean “to be crucified.” Turns out the Son of God would be lifted up on the cross.

And just before that, while Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples, he said to them, “This is my commandment: that you love one another. Do you want to know what love looks like? I’ll show you. There is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And then the Son of God went and did that very thing. “For God so loved the world that he gave God’s only Son . . . so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Which brings us to one final mystery of the faith (at least for today, because there are many such mysteries). Today I want to end by talking about the Resurrection. Otherwise known in today's text as "eternal life." You might say that so far we've talked about the "what" (new life, or what Jesus now calls "eternal life"), and the "how" (namely the Holy Spirit), and the "why" (which we just learned is God's love for the world), but we have yet to figure out the "when." And for that matter the "where."

I asked the Wednesday Bible study group what they thought of when they heard the phrase "eternal life." One person said "It's what will happen to us after we die if we believe and obey the Son of God. It's the place where we will go." Which is indeed what most of us learn.

But what if eternal life wasn't "there" and "then," but rather "here" and "now?" Here is how one commentator puts it: "Eternal life is one of the dominant metaphors in the Fourth Gospel to describe the change in human existence wrought by faith in Jesus . . . 'Eternal' does not mean mere endless duration of human existence, but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God. To have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God . . . [it] is not something held in abeyance until the believer's future, but begins in the believer's present."

So that is our "where," and our "when." For those of us who love the Lord, our new life, that is, eternal life, begins right here, right now, with the unending presence and grace and love of God. I'd call that a mystery worth believing in.

Amen.