

Jeff's reflection: "Directions from Jesus" – May 30

If you feel lost and you aren't sure which way to go, you might ask for directions. That's what ends up happening in today's scripture reading.

A man named Nicodemus comes in the darkness of night to meet Jesus.

Nicodemus comes to meet with Jesus at night, when there is less chance of being seen by others; comes at night when Jesus is not amongst the crowds, when Jesus is not occupied healing someone, or teaching his disciples. Nicodemus comes at night with his questions, his wonderings, his need to find out more about this rabbi who comes from Nazareth.

Nicodemus finds Jesus, and he greets Jesus with words that are both honouring and yet hint at an inner wrestling.

Nicodemus says, "Rabbi, we know that you are teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

We never find out what Nicodemus might have said after that opening line, because Jesus begins talking to him about directions to the kingdom of God.

Jesus first responds to Nicodemus by saying, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

The English translation we are using says "born from above." Other translations say "born again." The Gospel of John was written in Greek and the Greek word that is used in this instance can mean either of those – 'born from above' or 'born again'. Unfortunately, Jesus' primary language of speech was Aramaic, and we don't know what Aramaic word he might have used. But the multi-possibilities of the Greek are characteristic of the way Jesus taught, often using parables or stories that would elicit various interpretations and probably generate plenty of discussion amongst his listeners.

'Born from above' takes us into the area of directions. We are all born in this world. We all learn to walk and talk and eat and work and play in this world. We also tend to learn the ways of this world.

In the time of Jesus, the ways of the world included accepting that the Roman Empire was the dominant power and dominant military force in the world; meant accepting that wealth flowed from the poor to the powerful, that there was a chasm between the wealthy and the poor and there was no bridge over that chasm; meant accepting that the world was the way it was, that systems were the way they were, and that you never questioned the systems that were!

But there is another way to see the world, to be in the world. There is another way for

people to relate. The Jewish prophets spoke of this way – the way of doing justice and loving mercy, the way of righteousness, the way of befriending the poor and the vulnerable; the way of redistributing wealth so that everyone is fed and safe, everyone is welcomed, everyone is neighbour.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of another way - the way of the dreamers. Today, engineers creating electric cars are speaking of a new way of moving through this world in a way more ecologically neighbourly to the rest of creation.

Jesus says we are to be born from above. We are born of water – born from the womb as inhabitants of this earth, but we are also to be born of the Spirit – we are also born from the womb, the depths of God...born in this world, aware that there is more to this world than just what we see, touch and control.

You must be born from above – the directions are clear – God's Spirit is coming from above, from up there in the sky, in the heavens....

Except, Jesus then gives other directional advice. God is like the wind...and we don't know where the wind is coming from...wait, isn't the Spirit supposed to come from above...yes, but no; we don't know where it comes from. The wind can come at us from any direction, the wind can swirl and dance all around us.

A couple of weeks ago I was out for a walk and was about to enter a neighbourhood park, to walk along the gravel path bordered by park lawn on either side. Suddenly, I heard the wind, just a kind of swooshing sound, and I saw, to my right, the grass begin to shiver, and then leaves, in just that one area swirled and circled about four feet in the air, and the swishing swirling wind carried those leaves across the path in front of me and swirled and circled over a small area to my left, then the sound of the wind stopped, the leaves fell to the ground, and everything was still.

Meteorologists can probably explain the wind phenomena I witnessed, but for me, it was a reminder from a playful God to say, 'the wind blows where and when it chooses, and God is here, around you, with you, swirling, swooshing, blowing and dancing in the world.'

Just when we think we have our directions clear, just when we think we have God figured out, Jesus reminds us that God is like the wind, and the wind blows where it chooses, and God surprises us with another way of seeing in this world.

We are born from above, but the wind swirls all around us from any and every direction...

Jesus has one more word about directions:

"No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

So, we're back to the above language – ascend to heaven, go up to heaven. If heaven is where God is then God is 'up' in heaven...

Except, it's never that easy...the only way to ascend is by descending! The way you get up to heaven is by going down!

Where is God...up? Down? Swirling all around?

Jesus speaks of the Son of Man – a term that means 'the human one' ... and the one who is truly human is the one who descends, who does not try to find God by ascending to the place of power or wealth, but who embraces what the Dutch-born priest Henri Nouwen referred to as the way of 'downward mobility.'

Where did Jesus find God...Jesus knelt to speak with the lame who could not stand on their own; Jesus found God in touching those with skin rashes and disfigurements, those the Bible terms lepers, those whom most people avoided; Jesus found God in the hungry who yearned to be fed; in the blind who wanted to see; in the paralyzed whose worlds consisted of the cot on which they lay; in the marginalized who yearned for good news...

and in the religious student who came in the night seeking directions.

I suggest that Jesus directs us to discover that if heaven is where God is, then we dwell in heaven right now, for God is swirling, swooshing, blowing and dancing throughout this world...

to heal, to befriend, to birth a life of compassion and hope.

The one who comes from God is the one who sees God in our midst, sees the sacred in what we think is ordinary, to perceive the holy in the humble; or, as Pope Francis says, "to recognize the treasure hidden in our own fragility" - in our humanity.

We are born from above, born again, as we discover that God is not just up there, but down here, and around and amongst and within each one of us.

We are born from above as we descend deeper into God's loving presence, and as we fall into deeper trust in God's love. We are born of the spirit, as we discover the spirit of God within us, as we discover that we live in God, now and always.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

For reflection:

Have you ever had an experience that you would describe as a 'rebirth'? Have you ever had a major change of attitude, understanding, faith perspective?

What do you think of the idea that, if heaven is where God is, then we are in heaven

right now?

How might this idea change the way you look at the world?

When have you felt the presence of God?