

Life in the Spirit: God's Empowering Presence

Text: John 3:1-17

5-21-17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Can you recall a specific situation in your life that you would attribute directly to the Spirit’s empowerment? How did you respond? What was the effect on the situation or relationship?”

“What are some of the activities (or in-activities) in which you participate which you believe help to develop a more keen sense of awareness of the Spirit’s presence in your life? How have you seen yourself responding to such deepening union?”

“What are you looking to? What are you lifting up? To where are you looking for healing and wholeness?”
(Numbers 21)

“Is there an area of your life in which you been willing to substitute a self-imposed strategy for divine intervention?”

“How many of you have sincerely reached the point where you are ready to say about your life (not just your present uncomfortable and inconvenient circumstances), ‘You know, this just isn’t working!’ That you would be willing to see the whole thing de-constructed so that you could start all over again?”

Teaching Notes...

The bulk of the NT offerings were written to first-generation Christians whose experience of conversion involved an encounter with the Holy Spirit (being filled, coming upon). Somewhere along the line, our faith became *“institutionalized”* --- focused more on the systems/structures than the dynamic life in the Spirit, living out the life of Christ in and to the world.

My expressed-desire is that we somehow allow the Holy Spirit to leap off of the pages of our creeds and into the experiential life of the believing community.

All of the practices in which we participate are not an attempt to secure “more” of the Spirit, but simply to increase our awareness, responsiveness, and enjoyment of him.

Sometimes language frustrates us. Our attempts at getting “closer to God”, conjures images of lack of proximity that must be negotiated (e.g. when I say, “I want to be closer to my wife”. I’m not becoming “more married” to Lynette. I’m enjoying the union that already exists because of the covenant.)

“... we know how much God loves us because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts...”

Romans 5

As believers, we are never in the process of moving from “sinner” to “saint”. We are simply living into more robust expressions of who we already are (2 Corinthians 3:18).

“... when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own, giving you the Holy Spirit,”

Ephesians 1

To say that God “empowers” us is to say that his personal Presence, “with” and “in” us, allows us to interact with divine capabilities, meant to affect our present circumstances: to enact his good intentions upon the world.

It is in this famous conversation that Jesus coins the term, “born again”. A term that, in my era, was rife with baggage.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He is devout (Torah-observant). He is a member of the Jewish Council--- the Sanhedrin (supreme court of Judaism). He is held in high esteem by his community. He is wealthy. He is learned. No one would have any reason to believe that this was someone who needed God to lift him from his ruinous life.

“Rabbi (teacher), we all know that God has sent you to teach us...” (3:2).

Debate lingers about the sincerity and intention of Nicodemus. *Did he come as a representative of the other leaders? Was he acting alone? Was this some expression of “back room politics? Was this covert meeting the sincere inquiry of someone who recognized, in Jesus, something ‘other’, more satisfying than piety and ritual observance?* (John 19:39: seen with Joseph of Arimathea, secret disciple of Jesus).

What do we typically want from teachers? Information. Strategies. Assessments. Assistance. Not rescue. Not salvation.

Our proclivity is to pursue only those teachers with whom we share some affinity; those whom we believe will support and anchor our own positions. Who will *scratch where it itches* (2 Timothy 4:3).

“Where am I going wrong and what can I do differently?”, we ask teachers. *“What’s wrong with me and can anything be done for me?”*, we ask of those able to heal us. The types of questions we are asking are indicative of the what we believe to be the nature of our issue, and the types of resources we believe available to us.

“I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God” (3:3).

“born again” (Gr), ‘from above’

● Jesus doesn’t say to Nicodemus, *“You know, Nic, you’ve got a lot going for you. I wouldn’t mess with the current program, I would simply say that you need to tweak it, a bit. I think a few sessions together and some minor adjustments are all that’s necessary”*.

But, to this elderly, scholarly, well-respected religious leader Jesus says, *“Your whole life is ‘off-center’. Your first stud wasn’t plum and it cascaded down into the skewed life you are currently*

living. You need to start over, with different desires and with a new set of resources, available to you only from God.”

If you're going the wrong direction, your perseverance becomes foolishness. The worst possible thing you can do is commit to going faster and trying harder.

Jesus says that it's futile to simply throw more time and education and technology at the human dilemma and assume we can, if not completely eradicate it, certainly make it more tolerable.

Jesus' truth involved a dramatic confrontation with all that is *“most real”* about you. Your heart. It involves a decided break from (death to) the self-reliant, self-directed life and a radical re-orientation of your desires and will, so that you are now living out of who you really are.

So, it is the grace of God to permit us to be ambitious and exasperated.

It is not until we are “exhausted” and “have exhausted” all of our energies and resources on that which can never “save” us that we are willing to allow ourselves to be saved. Until then, we are not truly free.

“without being born of water and of the Spirit...” (3:5) [should likely be taken together: Isaiah 44 and Ezekiel 36].

baptism: expression of your entrance into the renewed, rescued community.

Spirit (pneuma): symbolism for an internal work. A dramatic, revelational encounter with the Spirit of God.

“Flesh gives birth to flesh...” The self-reliant and self-directed human being simply gives birth to offspring who share that DNA. But, Spirit gives birth to spirit.

“The wind blows wherever it pleases...” (3:8)

Jesus is saying that we need an encounter with the Spirit that we cannot harness, or tame, or predict, but with whom we might participate.

Most of what happens in salvation is beyond us. It is inaccessible to us so that our only reasonable posture is one of receptivity... welcoming salvation instead of attempting to explain it or generate it on our own.

“Being born” and being *“born again”* are seemingly the only (2) significant life-moments for which we are able to take no credit.

Numbers 21 offers us the story of the rebellion and the bronze serpent. The people affected were realizing the consequences of their own defiance and disobedience. But, interestingly, in the story, the very thing that is destroying them is strangely transformed into that which can serve to illicit healing... if they will simply ‘look to it’, trust it, for life. It seemed absurd, but not to those who were perishing.

“If I be lifted up...”

He will absorb upon himself the collective consequences of our own sin and serve as a means of providing healing. More importantly, he will proceed to clarify the motivation behind this saving/rescuing effort: *“the so love”* of God.

“How are we born again?” Perhaps there are some biblical directives: *“confession” (agreeing with); “repentance”; “looking to” (trusting).*

The healthy outcome of birth is not simply to attempt to figure out the birth process, but to enjoy life!
It’s simply an invitation to allow this truth to be “born in you”, not trying to “give birth” to something.

The only people who love God’s laws and take them seriously are those who know they can never be saved be them!

The only kids who truly enjoy coloring are those who realize that occasionally they will color outside the lines... but their pics will still make it onto the fridge.

Frankly, the gospel is not for people who are satisfied with the way things are. It’s for people who ‘hungry and thirsty’ (Matthew 5:6), not simply mildly curious or bored. It’s for those who have accumulated a great deal, but *“still haven’t found what they’re looking for”* (thanks, Bono).