

December 23, 2018

A World Turned Upside Down

John 3:1-21

A whole new world ...

I had a dream the other night. The dream was incredibly realistic. I knew I was going to remember it forever. But when I woke up, immediately it was gone. For a moment I had a vision of something extraordinary, powerful, and wonderful. Then, poof! Gone.

At Christmas-time, we dream of a just, fair, peaceful, happy world. We have this deeply ingrained longing for a world where people get along, where there is peace, where poverty is nonexistent, where all people have equal opportunities, where injustice is not tolerated, where sick people get help, where everyone is safe ... Almost everyone has this deeply embedded sense of justice. You can test this quite easily – go to any playground where kids are playing. Soon enough someone will say, "*That's not fair.*" Kids know what's right and wrong.

Our modern, sentimental dream of "peace on Earth" at Christmas-time sounds just as great: In the words of the classic Coke song:

*I'd like to build the world a home, And furnish it with love,
Grow apple trees and honey bees, And snow white turtle doves.*

*I'd like to teach the world to sing, In perfect harmony,
I'd like to hold it in my arms, And keep it company.*

*I'd like to see the world for once, All standing hand in hand
And hear them echo through the hills, For peace throughout the land.*

Wouldn't that be great? But then we turn on the news ... poof. Gone. Things seem so broken. We have learned to fix a lot of things. When I broke my finger, I went to the doctor; he put it in a splint for six weeks – I eventually had surgery – but it's fixed. Why can't we do that with the world? Why can't we make the world a perfect place?

It's not for lack of trying. Maybe if we were to have another "tough-on-crime bill" Canada will be a perfect place. But I doubt it. "Fairness," justice, civility ... we all believe in it, we all want it, but we just don't seem to be able to get it. It seems like an elusive dream ...

Something more ...

The people in Israel around the time of Jesus dreamt the same dream. The prophets looked forward to a time when, *"There will be no more gloom for those who are in distress ... The people walking in darkness shall see a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light shall dawn"* (Isaiah 9:1-2).

John has told us that Christmas, the birth of Jesus is the answer: *"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it ... The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world"* (John 1:4-5, 9). And yet, as we look at the world around us, there is still an awful lot of darkness.

One night, in the darkness, Nicodemus, a well-respected, well-educated Jewish elder, came to Jesus searching for more: *"Rabbi, we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you ..."* (John 3:2)

Jesus interrupted him, *"I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God"* (John 3:3). The Kingdom of God was an Old Testament vision of a place and time where there is justice, peace, harmony, sufficient food for all – where all nations live together in harmony with one another and with the world round them. It is the fulfillment of a dream of "shalom," of being in the personal presence of God Himself, of harmonious relationships – eternal relationships, and of beauty and wonder.

For instance, in Isaiah 11:1-9, the prophet talks about Jesus' coming, *"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord – and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.*

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist."

That dream of justice? That yearning to experience God? That love of good, healthy long-term relationships? That enjoyment of beauty? Those are not culturally conditioned responses. They are fundamental building blocks of who God created us to be ... That's why no amount of trying can extinguish them. They keep bubbling to the surface ... It's what we were created for. It's what we long for. And, according to the Bible, that's where we're headed ...

In Nicodemus' Jewish worldview, you are part of the Kingdom of God by being born Jewish – once. Only "children of Abraham" can get there. Being "*born again*" (or the Hebrew word could also be translated "*born from above*") makes no sense – biologically or theologically!

Jesus goes on to explain that being born physically from Jewish parents does make you biologically Jewish – that's all well and good. But that's not what the Kingdom of God is about. What Jesus calls "*being born of the Spirit*" is just as important as being born physically. And it is that birth – that "*born again*" or "*born from above*" birth – that is the key to being a citizen of the Kingdom of God – not being born Jewish!

These days being born Canadian is great. This is a great country in which to live. There are so many opportunities and privileges that have come my way simply because I was blessed to be born in Canada. Do you know that worldwide there are about 133 million births each year (247 births every minute, or four babies born every second)? Canada averages only 350,000 of those babies born per year. That means there is a 0.26% chance that any given baby will be born in Canada. So, if like me, you were born here, we really beat the odds! (Do you know that over 80% of the world's population lives on less than \$10/day – 50% on less than \$2.50/day). Being born Canadian – once – is great!

But Jesus says to me, too, "*Unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God*" (John 3:3). What Jesus calls "*being born of the Spirit*" is just as important as being born physically. And it is that birth – that "*born again*" or "*born from above*" birth – that is the key to being a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

What does it mean to be "born again" or "born from above"?

The key to most religions is that we have to climb the ladder to get to God (to use the metaphor from John 1:51 and Genesis 28). You have to follow the Five Pillars, or be better, and do better, to climb the ladder. We work to get to God. We work out our salvation and then, maybe, we'll be with God and the world will be a better place.

As the conversation continues, Jesus says, "*God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life*" (3:16). Try as we may to build a perfect world or even become perfect ourselves, it just doesn't happen. We cannot be good enough; so, God comes down the ladder. He comes down to us. God meets us where we are.

"*God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him*" (3:17). That's good news! But there is a caveat: "*There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son*" (3:18).

To be "born again" or "born from above" is to **believe** in Jesus as the Messiah, our Saviour, the One who is God-come-among-us. The One who comes to give us life. To give our lives purpose. The One whose death on the cross paid the price once and for all for all our sins. The One who rose triumphantly from the dead ... We believe. And we have everlasting/eternal life. That's the gospel, right? Yes, but ...

Jesus – and the New Testament writers – all emphasize that belief is not just intellectual agreement to the proposition that Jesus is the Son of God (as we often present it). When you are "born" you get a life – a new life. Belief also involves being "born again" or "born from above" in terms of how we live our lives this very moment. Jesus talks about *"If you love me, obey my commandments ... Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me ... All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them"* (John 14:15, 21, 23).

John in one of his later letters will write, *"Those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did"* (1 John 2:5-6).

Paul uses the imagery of being born again/from above graphically: *"You should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus. Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires ... Give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God"* (Romans 6:11-13).

The answer – to our longing for justice, our search for God, our yearning for loving, meaningful eternal relationships, our quest for beauty, is being "born again" – "born from above" – through believing in Jesus.

Not just intellectually. But also born into a new life. Our old way of life is gone. Instead we are challenged to be new people with a new life, a life walked in step with God. Being born a second time means we *"Walk in step with the Spirit ... (We) Follow the Spirit's leading in every part of your lives ..."* (Galatians 5:25). When we live like that, we are part of making the dream a reality. The world really can be a better place.

How does that challenge me? How will that change me?