

John 3: 1-5
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What you see is what you get

There's a hotly contested Urban Legend that circulated quite a bit about 10 years ago - made popular by that Portland-filmed movie, *What the Bleep Do We Know?* The legend is that when the natives of this land first encountered the ships on which Christopher Columbus and company were sailing, they could not see them. In fact, the only one who could perceive anything was the shaman of the tribe who could see the effect of the ships on the water - the ripples that the ships made - but not the ships themselves.

It took many trips to the shoreline in order to be able to finally see what was creating those ripples. And in sharing with the tribe what the cause was, such explanation then enabled others to see physically the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria.

Now, as I said, this is a hotly contested story. First of all, how does anyone know what the those first American Indian tribes experienced, as all oral history has been lost with the extinction of that tribe. Secondly, even if this story was shared at some point early in history, much might be lost in translation. And lastly, it just seems too hyperbolic to believe - the kind of material that makes a great Tall Tale, like Paul Bunyon, but nothing more.

However, haven't we each had the experience of having trouble reconciling what we expect to see with what is really before us? Reconciling our physical exercise of seeing with our mental exercise of understanding?

I can't tell you the number of times I go looking for something that I've misplaced. I scour the house two, three times. Looking, looking. And when someone else steps in to help, usually Anna, they point to it right under my nose. But most often in a place that I don't *expect* to see it. I've shaped in my mind what I figure will be there, and it has a clear affect on my vision.

Or how about when you encounter something for which you have little point of reference. It takes time and effort of perceiving to have it begin to make sense.

Someone who is a master at chess looks at a chess board and sees whole game progressions laid out before them. But the beginner sees interesting carved pieces on alternating colored squares.

The pieces are all there in the same way before them. But what you see and the meaning you ascribe changes as understanding grows.

Now, I'm not really that interested in defending this story of the Native Americans' first encounter with Europeans - or the movie from which this legend hails, for that matter. But I *do* think that it offers an interesting point of reflection for us this morning. That our seeing and our understanding, both so closely intertwined, are also dependent on our heart's alignment.

Nicodemus creeps into Jesus' presence one night. He does not want to be seen by day approaching this wildly radical teacher. But he comes before the new rabbi and admits that “we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the power of God.” He and his compatriots have seen the miracles and heard the stories. They know the work of God through the witnessing of such remarkable events.

But they are confused as to their meaning. They have seen the ripples in the water, and they know something is afoot. But it is beyond their comprehension to know what the meaning of it all is.

Jesus stands before Nicodemus and sees the struggle. The struggle to reconcile seeing with understanding. And Jesus offers Nicodemus the invitation to step beyond that.

“The truth of the matter is, unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Born from above, born anew. Changed. Transformed. Shaped in a new fashion by the miracle of God among us.

He tells Nicodemus that he will “understand” with his mind when he “knows” with his heart. God's love will be present to him in a new way when he is transformed by that love.

Being born from above, being born again, this process is not just about turning one's mind in a particular direction. Nicodemus has that part all sorted out.

He's part of the scholarly elite, the Sanhedrin. These were the judges of the land, there to interpret Jewish law - and the highest appointees in this body could even try the King. His role in this vocation indicates that not only is he a very faithful Jew, but he is extremely well-versed in all Jewish tradition and law. He *knows* his faith.

And Nicodemus has physically *seen* the work of Jesus, enough so that he knows that Jesus is of God. But what that really means - well the pieces haven't all fallen into place for him.

Jesus sees in him something unresolved, a hunger or curiosity perhaps. And Jesus recognizes that this driving need, the one that has sent Nicodemus out by night to learn more, will not be addressed through typical patterns of resolution.

In fact, those old patterns - looking for what you need where you expect to find it - those patterns of behavior may be stumbling blocks - patterns behind which Nicodemus can hide.

So Jesus challenges him to think beyond, broader than he would normally. In fact, Jesus says to leave behind his reliance on thinking, on the order of the law - transform it all and be born again.

Nicodemus doesn't understand and plays with Jesus a bit. "What?? How can a grown man crawl back inside his mother's womb?"

It is very difficult to manufacture a situation literally or metaphorically in which one can crawl back into one's mother's womb.

It is difficult to create a climate in which we can see the commonplace world with a vision, such that we see it as completely and entirely new. We cannot *fabricate* ourselves into a position in which we see only the ripples on the water, rather than the boat itself. We cannot un-see.

If we cannot impose this new vision upon our experience, where does this leave us?

Jesus responds to Nicodemus's sarcasm by invoking the Spirit of God. In essence, he calls upon the trinity. Nicodemus - work beyond your body and your mind - beyond your seeing and your understanding - and allow your heart or your soul, to be a piece of this as well.

Be transformed - born anew.

Jesus invites our hearts into this relationship with God. He recognizes that on some level no amount of *thinking* about faith - is going to transform understanding. Jesus brings the third leg of the stool into the equation - mind, body and soul. They are all significant in witnessing the work of the love of God in our midst.

We offer our prayers of gratitude every Sunday - and I hope you do on your own as well during the week. And I know that there are those among us who have experienced seeing their world in a different way because of it. Born again? Well, perhaps our sensibilities would shirk from such language.

But yes. We transform ourselves and our world as we train ourselves to see in new ways.

Where and how we see beauty is determined by what we train our eyes to see - and what our eyes see is determined in part by what our hearts are prepared to be open to.

Be born again, friends. Commit yourselves to the process of such transformation such that the world unfolds before you in waves of God's mercy and love. Such that you are tuned by gratitude and mercy.

What you see and the meaning you ascribe changes as understanding grows. Vision takes in a broader scope, the mind makes room for new meaning, the heart perceives the work of God's love to transform. W.H. Murray said, "The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves, too."¹ It's all of a piece. May it be so. Amen.

¹ W.H. Murray, *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*