

Infinite Presence

Psalm 23; John 3:1-8

Christina Reimer (November 22, 2020)

I'd like to start with a prayer of illumination.

Lord, our Shepherd, our Mother and our Comforter, as we enter into this time of meditation, we ask that you open our hearts to your presence and our ears to your wisdom. Amen.

When I was 17, I suffered the loss of an important relationship and I was raw with grief. I was working at Silver Lake Mennonite Camp at the time and one night, I couldn't keep the tears from flowing, so I walked out of the Dining Hall and into the field so I could be alone. I sat at the edge of the field, closed my eyes and prayed to God for comfort and guidance. As I prayed, a hand started to gently stroke my hair and I felt a deep sense of peace wash over me. I sat there for a long time with my eyes closed, just feeling God's presence. Finally, I opened my eyes and looked up and the branches of a large pine tree were blowing in the wind. One of the branches had been brushing against my head.

Some might say that the realization that it was *only* a tree constitutes a scientific debunking of what I thought was a spiritual experience; an alternative explanation for what I perceived to be God's presence. But, for me, it was one of the most profound spiritual experiences of my life. Can you imagine that at that precise moment, when I needed God most, a branch happened to move gently across my head? To me, this was a miracle: a sign of God's presence acting through nature.

I thought about my miraculous story as I read through the Gospel of John because John is full of miracles. In fact, the first 12 chapters of John have been collectively called "The Book of Signs", named for the many miracles that Jesus performs to show that he is indeed the Son of God. The greatest miracle appears at the end of this gospel when Jesus is resurrected from the dead and appears to his disciples.

But the disciple Thomas does not believe that Jesus has been resurrected and demands proof. He says to the other disciples: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." Eventually, Thomas meets the risen Christ, who says to him: "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." With this, Thomas believes and says to Jesus, "My Lord

and my God!” Then Jesus tells him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (20:25-29).

If you haven’t personally experienced a miracle in your life, you should take comfort in this lesson from Jesus! You are blessed for not having seen, but still having believed!

So why does Jesus perform miracles at all if he’s *just* a little bit disappointed that people like Thomas might need miracles in order to believe? The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard offers wisdom that I find compelling. Kierkegaard says that Jesus’ miracles and signs serve to make us “attentive”. They draw the heart towards Jesus and his ministry. Through the signs that Jesus performs in the Gospel of John, he is saying: here I am. And you should pay attention to what I have to tell you.

So, what do we attend to? What captures our attention? Do we spend our days nurturing fearful and resentful thoughts and feelings? Or do we attend to what Jesus wants us to see, namely God’s presence in the world?

Something about Jesus draws the attention of Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who seeks out a conversation with him at night to ask him some questions. But let’s go back a bit to what happens right before this conversation.

Just before the Jewish Passover, Jesus travels to Jerusalem with some of his friends where he discovers people selling animals and exchanging money around the temple, as if it were a common marketplace and not a place of worship. In a fit of righteous anger, Jesus turns over tables, scatters coins and drives out the animals and their owners from the temple courts.

The Jewish leaders are offended and demand that Jesus provide proof that he has the authority to commit such destructive acts. They ask him, “what miraculous sign can you show us to prove yourself?” Jesus answers them, “destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.” Not understanding Jesus’ meaning, the leaders respond incredulously, saying, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?!” But the temple that Jesus is speaking about is his body and after the resurrection, his disciples remember what he had said (John 2:18-22).

The clearing of the temple takes place near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in the Gospel of John and near the end of Jesus’ ministry in Matthew, Mark and Luke. And right after this story comes the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. These two

stories are connected thematically in that they are both talking about resurrection. In John 2, Jesus talks about his own body as a temple that will be destroyed and then rebuilt, and, in John 3, Jesus talks about what it means for human beings to be born again.

It is a curious story. Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are “born again” and Nicodemus replies: “how can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Nicodemus is noting the rational impossibility of rebirth. It is an offense to reason, to use Kierkegaard’s terminology.

Being “born again” has taken on multiple meanings for Christians. My dad used to tell me about tent revivals he attended when he was young where travelling charismatic preachers would come to town and invite you to “walk the sawdust trail” to the front of the tent, where you would confess your sins and give your life to Jesus, becoming born again in the Spirit.

But I’d like to tell you about another group and their connection to the Nicodemus story. There is a little town named Nicodemus in northcentral Kansas. It was founded in 1877 by recently freed African American slaves and it attracted other Black settlers from Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina and Tennessee.

The biblical Nicodemus was a significant figure for African American slaves, so it is fitting that there is an all-Black town that bears his name. I read an article by Rosamond C. Rodman that explains why Nicodemus holds a special place for Black Americans.

According to Rodman, in the years before the American Civil War, southern states had laws that made it illegal for slaves to learn how to read, so slaves met in secrecy at night to gain literacy so that they could “reject the Christianity of the slaveholders” and reclaim the Bible for themselves. Nicodemus, for them, was someone who came to Jesus at night, probably because he was afraid of being found out by other leaders who were out to condemn Jesus to death. Rodman writes: “Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the same way African Americans came to the Bible: at night and in secret, understandably afraid of the consequences.”¹

The notion of being born again was also one that resonated with Black slaves. Being born again meant, for them, the death of their slave selves and the shedding

¹ Rosamond C. Rodman, *Great Plains Quarterly*, “Naming a Place Nicodemus”.

of their slave names while also representing the birth of their true selves as freed children of God.

For Black slaves, Nicodemus' question about how we can be born again takes on a real, lived significance about what it means to be reborn into freedom. And this is the beauty of biblical texts. They reach out across time and context to touch God's people in ways that are regenerative and life-giving for us in our lived experience.

So, what does the text hold for us today at TUMC on Eternity Sunday?

I chose this passage because it teaches us that the notion of eternity is not about simply living forever, but about living a spiritually renewed life right now. It's about feeling God's presence in the present, especially in light of this ever-looming threat to our health and the health of our loved ones. When we think of eternity as simply going on and on and on, then this makes our grief harder to bear when we lose someone to death. I know I have felt ripped off many times because my father-in-law died in his 50s and both of my parents died too young. Why couldn't they have stayed a little longer?

I read a quote many years ago that has stuck with me and that gives me peace in the midst of grief. ***Eternity is not limitless duration, but infinite presence.***² Eternity, then, does not fit into our understanding of time in terms of length, but is about how fully we experience God's infinite presence in the living moment. I felt the fullness of God's presence when the tree was blowing in the wind at camp many years ago. I feel it when I hear a beautiful piece of music like The 23rd Psalm. And I feel it through the faith I share with you, my beloved congregation: a faith I also share with my loved ones who have died. As Kierkegaard said, we are spiritual contemporaries with those who have died and with Jesus himself through the faith that we share in the infinite presence of God.³

This Eternity Sunday, I pray that you will experience God's liberating, regenerating presence in your life, especially amidst your experiences of grief, loss, anxiety and loneliness.

² I couldn't find the source of this quote, but I think that it is a paraphrase of something Wittgenstein wrote: "Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in the way in which our visual field has no limits." (Taken from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)

³ Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*.

I'll end with some words from The 23rd Psalm which you heard earlier in the service, a musical piece that was written by the African American composer and musician, Bobby McFerrin.

She restores my soul, She rights my wrongs
She leads me in a path of good things
And fills my heart with songs
Even though I walk, through a dark and dreary land
There is nothing that can shake me
She has said She won't forsake me
I'm in her hand. *Amen*