

Lent 2A 2017 sermon

John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

For the past 7 seasons, the television program *NCIS* has been the most watched scripted shows on American television. Those of you who watch it know that the main character is Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs, and that one of the reasons Gibbs is such a good investigator is that he relies on his “gut feelings.” But what does that mean? We sometimes talk about a kind of knowing that we don’t get from our 5 senses – we call it “a sixth sense,” or “intuition,” “a hunch,” “a feeling,” an “inkling,” an “insight.” Isabel Briggs Myers, expanding on the work of Carl Jung, recognized another “way of perceiving” that is just as valid as perceiving through our 5 senses. “People perceive through their senses,” Briggs Myers wrote, “and they also perceive things that are not and never have been present to their senses...”¹ Those of you who have taken the Myers/Briggs typology test may know if you are an “S” or an “N” – whether you prefer to perceive through your senses or your “intuition.”

Now, Briggs Myers approached her studies from the standpoint of the science of psychology; but others, from **ancient** times, have noted that there are ways of perceiving *spiritual* realities, also – ways of perceiving that do not seem to involve our 5 physical senses.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the Pharisee Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can **see** the kingdom of God without being born from above." *The Message* translation has Jesus say: "Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to **see** what I'm pointing to—to God's kingdom." Why is it that **one** person – the person "born from above" – can *see* what Jesus is pointing to, while the person NOT born from above *cannot* see what Jesus is pointing to? Does the person born from above have 20/20 vision, and the person **not** born from above have 20/200 vision? Clearly, Jesus is not talking about **physical** seeing. He *must* be talking about some *different* way of seeing, different way of perceiving – something along the lines of NCIS agent Gibbs' "gut" perception; "seeing" things, as Isabel Briggs Myers wrote, "that are not and never have been present to [one's] senses."¹

"What is born of the flesh is flesh," Jesus tells Nicodemus, "and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." In other words, our fleshly eyes see physical things, while spiritual things are only seen with "spiritual eyes." In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!'; because the Kingdom of God is within you." (*Luke 17:20b-21, TEV*) Spiritual eyes see within.

12th-Century theologian Hugh of St. Victor and others who followed him said that humanity was given three different sets of eyes. The first eye was the eye of flesh (the senses), the second was the eye of reason (or the mind), and the third eye was the eye of true understanding (or the heart). St. Paul himself spoke of this third eye when he wrote to the Ephesians, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ... may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation..., so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you..." (*Ephesians 1:17-18a*) The eyes of your heart enlightened. Writing in the 5th Century, St. Augustine said that the whole purpose of this life, the reason we celebrate the sacraments, the reason we read the scriptures, is to "restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen." It is the eye of the heart that sees God.

Nicodemus represents the outward focus of his fellow Pharisees, who are obsessed with externals: washing hands, offering ritual sacrifices, etc. Jesus speaks in spiritual language, but Nicodemus interprets what Jesus says in physical terms, thinking that Jesus is saying that one must crawl back into one's mother's womb and be born again. It's an absurd image, to be sure, which shows how seeing *only* with the eye of the flesh, only physical things external to ourselves, leads to spiritual blindness. "Blind guides" is what Jesus calls the Pharisees in

Matthew's Gospel. (15:14; 23:16, 24) Jesus tries to move Nicodemus beyond the physical level, but he fails.

"What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit." "To be born of [the Spirit]," writes Fr. John Shea, "is to experience God's being sustaining your own being."² Clearly, "experiencing God's being sustaining our own being" is not something that is perceived through the eye of the flesh or the eye of the mind, but rather is perceived with the eye of the heart, inside, in our soul. "God cannot be found 'out there,'" wrote St. Augustine, "until God is first found 'in here,' within ourselves." "Being born from above" refers to a direct experience of God.

So how do we *train* this eye of the heart, so that we might see God more clearly, experience God more directly?

If Nicodemus teaches us anything, it is that we will never see God with the eye of our heart if we are totally fixated on, and possessed by, what we see with the eye of the flesh and the eye of the mind, which is what the Pharisees were obsessed with. We cannot hear the "still, small voice" of God within our soul over the din of competing noise coming from without and the constant distraction of thoughts jumping around in our minds. "Be still, and know that I am God," we are instructed in Psalm 46. The **stillness** comes *before* the knowing of God. When God tells the confused and frightened prophet Elijah to stand on the mountain, for the Lord is about to pass by, a great wind comes, "so strong that it was splitting the mountains," but God was not in the wind. Next came an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then a fire, but God was not in the fire. Finally, there was a "sound of sheer silence" – and God's voice spoke from that silence. (1 Kings 19:11-13, NRSV)

My friends, if you and I are going see with the eye of our heart, we are going to have to tone down the signals bombarding the eye of our flesh and the eye of our mind. We will have to be still if we are to know God, see the kingdom of God, experience God more directly. And silence and stillness will not come unless we carve out time for it in our lives, for we are bombarded by noise, busy-ness, and stimulus from all sides. Even our liturgy is filled with words or music. I try to interject short periods of silence, as our Prayer Book directs, at various places in our worship, and we maintain silence before worship in our tradition. Even so, our worship is mostly words and sounds.

Lent is a perfect time to include intentional times of silence in your own life, if you do not already do so. Turn off the TV or radio; take the earbuds out of your ears. Listen with the ear of your heart; see with the eye of your heart. (You may have noticed that the word "listen" and the word "silent" have exactly the same letters, just rearranged.) Some of us, myself included, have found Centering Prayer to be very helpful; but there are many ways to bring about the quieting of our minds and outward senses ("born of the flesh") in order to see and hear God

more directly with the heart (“born of the spirit”). It will take practice, for the “muscles” of our heart-perception are not nearly as well-exercised as the muscles of our mind or 5 senses. We have even turned Bible-reading into an exercise of the mind, rather than listening with our hearts to the silent Word of God coming to us through the written word.

My friends, we all know that today both the Christian Church and our political life together are fractured, with disagreements escalating to hardening of hearts. In such an environment, the eye of the heart cannot see; the ear of the heart cannot hear. The only path I can see for healing and salvation (and they are the same word in the New Testament Greek) is through the perception of the heart, accessed through a silencing of all the competing noises, anger, differences, hostility, and arguments. For I believe our Christmas Carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” has it right when it says, “How silently, how silently the wondrous Gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.” Or as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for **they** shall see God.”

AMEN

¹ Isabel Briggs Myers with Peter B. Myers, *Gifts Differing*, Consulting Psychologists Press, 1980, p. 2

² John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 110