

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Was Jesus just trying to be difficult? Here's this big opportunity – one of the power elite has come out to see him, to check him out. He could score a mega-disciple here, a connector, an influencer. Nicodemus was a big-time member of the ruling council of the Jewish leaders. He was a Pharisee. They thought their fidelity to the law was all they needed to be right with God – and along comes this traveling medicine show, this Jesus, who doesn't look right, talk right, who's from Galilee, for heaven's sake – saying God's kingdom is here among you. They want to reject him – but then there are those darn miracles popping up all the time. What do they do with that?

So Nicodemus comes out to meet him – see the guy for himself. He comes at night. And what does he get? A Jesus who seems to speak in riddles. *No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Huh? What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. The Spirit blows where it will... What?*

And when Nicodemus says, in effect, "Say what?" Jesus ups the ante – "You can't enter the kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit." "Flesh is flesh, spirit is spirit; if you don't get it when I speak of earthly things how are you going to understand heavenly things..." The more I read this, the less I understand it.

Which may have been Jesus' point. We can't see it by thinking harder about it – we've got to feel it in our spirit. In fact, we can only perceive it in our spirit. "You need to be born anew, by water – and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Then you're going to see who I really am. Then you'll perceive the Kingdom." If want to "see" the Realm of God, the Life of God, active around us through the Holy Spirit – we'll need to cultivate double vision. I'm talking about is the ability to see two realities at once: the fleshly, natural human world, and the world of Spirit, less accessible to our five senses but perceptible with faith vision. I liken it to the operating system on a computer – will we run on our human system, or the spiritual one God offers? That one doesn't drain our batteries.

Seeing what isn't visible – this image that comes up again and again in the Bible. It's what Abraham had a knack for doing – trusting God's promises, no matter how wacky or far-away they seemed.

Abraham left his homeland – at the age of 75, mind you – because God said, "Go to the land I will bring you to." How many of us would give up what we know, what we can see, on a promise of a blessing we can't see?

Can you think of a time when you have gone forward on faith?

Abraham trusted God's promise of descendants, though his eye and experience told him he and Sarah were way too old to have children.

Abraham was able to see what he couldn't see – he could trust in God.

This is what Paul says in Romans – that Abraham wasn't blessed because he followed the rules; his obedience came before any rules got set down.

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

In other words, if we could enter the Realm of God by following the rules, we wouldn't need faith, or a promise, or a savior. Jesus would be just a guy.

Paul was one of the champion rule-followers of all time, also a Pharisee, until learned that was a losing game, that God was offering the free gift of forgiveness. Then he was still a rule-follower, but not because he thought it would earn points.

Paul experienced such a transformation, it was like new birth.

He felt his old self died and he was reborn in Christ.

We can't choose when and how we're born, but we can choose what kind of faith: to have the faith of Abraham, who believed God's promises and followed God's calls, when he couldn't see how they could possibly turn out well;

Or we can have the faith of Nicodemus, who believes that religion is about following rules rather than growing in intimate relationship with God.

Nicodemus got there eventually – after Jesus' death, he helped bury him.

Did he finally understand then what Jesus meant by saying that he had to be lifted up, so that we might have eternal life? Or did he think he was burying his hope?

We don't know. But if he'd followed Jesus sooner he would have had three years of rich relationship with God himself.

We can't get ourselves born in spirit any more than we got ourselves born the first time, but what we can do is say "yes" to it.

We can cultivate our “double vision,” perceiving spiritual reality with our spirits even as we process sensory data with our physical faculties.

You know how you see when you’re swimming in the ocean or a lake.

If we stand up in the water, we see the sky, the land,
all the things our senses say are the real world.

We can’t see under the water – the surface only reflects the sky and land.

But if we put our heads under the water, there’s a whole world there –
fish, and plants, a landscape we were unaware of, that looks like,
but is not the same as, the one we spend most of our time in.

There is a whole world going on around us all the time, this God-Life,
a spiritual world, simultaneous to this reality, and sometimes affecting it.

One way to describe our spiritual work as Christ-followers in this life,
is to become amphibious, equally able to live in the water and on land.

Only for us, it is equally able to function in this reality and God-reality at once.

That means learning how to swim at the surface, to be able to see both worlds.

Ambrose of Milan, a bishop in the 4th century, wrote an instruction to
the recently baptized, saying that they were to become “like fish,”
*“Imitate the fish,” he says. “It is in the sea and above the waves. It is in the sea
and swims on the waters. On the sea the tempest rages, violent winds blow; but
the fish swims on. It does not drown because it is used to swimming. In the same
way, this world is the sea for you. It has various currents, huge waves, fierce
storms. You too must be a fish, so that the waves of this world do not drown you.”*

That is a way to live by faith instead of by anxiety – to learn to live in the water.

Learn to expect blessing. Coronavirus? Toxic political system?

Fluctuating markets? Expect blessing.

We are being invited into new life, to be born again by water and the Spirit.

Are we ready like Abraham, to go where we can’t see, trusting God’s promises?

*It depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed
to all his descendants... in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives
life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*

We are in the business of working with God to call into existence things that are

not yet – hope, justice, healing, food enough for all, peace beyond understanding.

Even now the things that do not exist are coming into view. *Amen.*

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."

Genesis 12:1-8

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **I will bless those who bless you**, and the one who curses you I will curse; and **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"

Romans 4:1-5(6-12)13-17

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as

something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. [So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin."

Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.]

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") -- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.