

It was nighttime in ancient Jerusalem, in the days before streetlights or lit-up signs. Nicodemus the Pharisee made his way through the dark streets to find Jesus. This teacher from Galilee had been in the capital city for only a few days, but already he had caused enough trouble to make a bad name for himself: he had stormed the Holy Temple itself with a whip, driving out the animals being sold, grabbing sacks of coins from the moneylenders and pouring them out on the floor, flipping over tables while yelling things about “his father’s house.” Many of the people, many of the other Pharisees, and many of the powerful leaders in the Temple called Jesus dangerous, a troublemaker, a rioter. But Nicodemus couldn’t stop thinking about the signs and miracles this Jesus was doing; he had to speak with him. Still, with Jesus’s reputation, better to do it under the cover of night.

Jesus immediately turned their conversation to the kingdom of God: how to see it, how to be a part of it. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” he said to Nicodemus. “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

Those two statements bring up a lot of questions. Nicodemus focused on the physical questions: How can an adult be born again? That doesn’t make any biological sense. But for me the big questions are: What is the kingdom of God? Why is it so hard for us to see and to be a part of? What keeps us from seeing it and joining in? If we can understand the answers to those questions, maybe we can get a better idea of what Jesus means when he says we need to be reborn in a new way.

I had those questions in my head while I was watching one of my favorite science-fiction shows this week. The episode followed a soldier named Stripe on his first real mission. His team’s main job is to find and kill what they call “roaches,” and we hear about these creatures little by little. They steal food from towns; they commit other crimes; they spread disease; they carry mental and physical problems that are bad for the gene pool; they are the enemy. After all that build-up, we finally we see these roaches: Stripe is searching a suspicious house and pulls back a hanging sheet to discover a group of humanoid creatures with weird, pale skin, sharp teeth, discolored eyes. They shriek in alien sounds and leap out at him, and one of them keeps pointing something that looks like a high-tech pen (or maybe a sonic screwdriver or one of those Men-in-Black memory-wiping-sticks) in Stripe’s face. When he’s taken them all out, Stripe picks up the pen-thing, pushes a button,

and an intense green light flashes. He blinks, drops it to the ground, and returns to his troop.

When Stripe goes out on his second mission a few days later, he experiences everything differently. And I mean everything. The colors of nature are brighter: the green of the trees, the blue of the sky. He picks up handfuls of grass and holds it up to his nose, breathing in deeply as he realizes he hasn't smelled something like that in a long time. The other soldiers wonder if he's going crazy.

Suddenly his team is under attack. Stripe and one other soldier, Raiman, are the only ones left standing. They run for cover, then they head into a farmhouse to find their attackers — and Stripe is shocked when Raiman starts taking out bystanding civilians. Stripe knocks out Raiman and escapes with a woman and her child. When they reach a safe place, the woman, with a mix of fear and hope, asks Stripe, “You can see me as I really am? You don't see a roach?”¹

Slowly Stripe discovers that he and the other soldiers have all been implanted with devices that change the way they perceive the world. These devices are supposed to lessen the trauma of combat: they can't smell the awful smells of war; they literally see and hear enemies as monsters. The flash of green light from the pen had broken Stripe's device, changing the way he perceived everything and everyone, turning upside-down the way he understood himself and his job and his world. To use the metaphors of today's gospel reading, Stripe had been reborn.

Jesus said that we need to be “born from above” or (in other translations) “born again” or “born anew” in order to even be able to perceive the kingdom of God.² The gospels talk about the kingdom of God in a few different ways: in some ways, it is already around us; but it is also still coming, getting closer, growing; and one day it will arrive in fullness. But, Jesus said in today's reading, we can't just naturally see that. We can't see the kingdom as it already is around or as its time of fullness is drawing near without being born anew. Maybe that's because we can't automatically see the world as it really is, as God sees it. Like the device implanted in Stripe's brain, there is something in us and around us that keeps us from seeing as God sees.

¹ Charlie Brooker, “Men Against Fire,” *Black Mirror*, season 3, episode 5, directed by Jakob Verbruggen, (Netflix: October 21, 2016). *Note: This show contains “adult situations,” and some episodes contain more potentially offensive content than others. Use discretion if you decide to check it out...and maybe skip season 1, episode 1.*

² You can see how it's translated in many Bible versions at <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/John%203:3>

The writings in the Bible offer us some ideas about how God sees the world and about what God's kingdom looks like and will look like. Over and over in the prophets, in the great Old Testament stories, in the song of Mary, and the words of Jesus, we hear that God cares for everyone, desires everyone to have enough, to thrive, to experience the blessings and love of God and others. That means that God and God's messengers often speak up on behalf of those suffering or being oppressed, the overlooked and the avoided and the misunderstood.

The Bible also tells of a kingdom of God which will be made up of all nations. Rob Bell elaborates: "That's *everybody*. That's all those different skin colors, languages, dialects, and accents; all those kinds of food and music; all those customs, habits, patterns, clothing, traditions, and ways of celebrating — multiethnic, multisensory, multieverything."³ All those things we see as foreign and maybe uncomfortable...all of it looks familiar to the God who created all people and dwells with all people.

And then, trying to get an idea about the kingdom of God, we might think not only of the way God sees the world but also the way God works in the world. As Christians we believe that God works with a justice that understands all sides, a justice rooted in love and concern for all people. We believe in a God who chooses to be merciful without end, a God of radical grace. We believe in a God who forgives things we could never forgive and loves people even in the midst of their sin. We believe in a God who is bringing both justice and grace to fruition all around us.

And all of that sounds wonderful when we're hearing it from our pews on Sunday morning. But when God's kingdom takes to the streets, it can be hard for us to handle, hard for us to see as something coming from God. That's why Nicodemus went to see Jesus at night: because so many people — especially the people with power or good social standing — couldn't see the kingdom of God in what Jesus was doing. Wreaking havoc in the Holy Temple? Spending time with prostitutes, with scammers, with obvious sinners? Hanging around lepers and other sick people? Speaking publicly against the ways the government and the religious institution mistreated those in need? Sometimes the kingdom of God comes off as offensive.

³ Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 34.

So what prevents us humans from seeing the kingdom of God when it's happening around us? Why do we sometimes just not notice it; why are we — like some of the Pharisees of Jesus times — offended instead of joyful? What keeps us from seeing the world as God sees it?

The Bible talks about sin, about having hard hearts. I think part of it is just that we humans are limited beings. The way we see and understand the world is bound by so many factors, some of them outside of our control; the time and place and culture where we grow up and where we live our lives (think of how often we say, “Of course that person thought that way; they were just a product of their times!”). Our perception is affected by the things other people have taught us, through word and example. Our perception is affected by what we have opportunity to learn and experience. Our perception is affected by our own needs and desires: whether they are for basic things like safety and security or our more selfish wants. So how could we possibly see like the God who is beyond all of our situations and knowledge and limitations?

And yet Jesus says we can, if we are born again, born anew, born from above. If we are born of water and the Spirit.

It was that “being born of water and the Spirit” that Martin Luther relied on so heavily in problems like this. He was the king of saying, “We can't do anything good on our own” — maybe even to a sort of unhealthy extent. But I can imagine Luther reading this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus and saying, “Well, of course I can't see or enter the kingdom of God on my own!” But Luther believed that the Holy Spirit works within us to transform us into saints who can see and participate in the kingdom of God. Our rebirth — our baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit — works in us daily to remove the things within us that keep us from God and the kingdom, and our rebirth works in us daily to grow our faith, our understanding, our goodness.

The Holy Spirit works in us as we read Scripture, helping us to see the world more like God sees it. The Holy Spirit works in us as we realize God's love for us, and we share that love with other people. The Holy Spirit works in us as we meet others and try to see the image of God in them. The Holy Spirit moves us to grow in our own understanding, mercy, and love. I see all of these things in this congregation every day, and it helps me believe the Holy Spirit truly is working in us all, helping us to see God's kingdom more clearly, helping us to enter that kingdom and be part of its work in our world.