

Flesh and Spirit¹
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If you recognize this song snippet, sing it with me!

“Heaven, Heaven is a place, a place where nothing, nothing ever happens.”

That is the refrain from one of my favorite songs as a teenager—“Heaven,” by Talking Heads. My very favorite verse was this one:

“When this kiss is over it will start again/ Will not be any different, will be exactly the same.
It's hard to imagine that nothing at all/ Could be so exciting, could be so much fun.”

I liked it when I was a teenager because I thought it really captured everything there was to say about Heaven. Now, mind you, I grew up *without religion*, but I had heard about Heaven. Everyone does sooner or later. And as far as I knew, everything there stayed *the same*. No one *ever* changed. Everybody had wings and halos, and played harps and sang beautifully about God all day long, over and over and over... Which, frankly, sounded downright *boring* to me. So the song seemed to describe Heaven perfectly.

And if *Heaven* is some sort of static, eternal place where *nothing ever happens*, what does that suggest about God? At the very least it seems to imply that God *likes* things to be repetitious, fixed or boring. It could also suggest that God *may be* repetitious, fixed and boring. And many Christian hymns would seem to back this up. God is described as...“O God who changes not, ...” or “from age to age the same...” or “still the same as ever...” or as an “immovable rock.” None of these images suggest a very fluid or dynamic God. They would seem to say about God what Talking Heads said about Heaven—nothing ever really happens or changes in God.

I am not sure about you, but that is simply not how I relate to God at all, now that I have grown out of my protestant agnostic background. In fact, I find God is highly dynamic and always expanding. God is constantly outrunning my expectations and definitions whenever I get too comfortable with my own little human understanding.

This is also the situation in which Nicodemus finds himself when he talks to Jesus in this morning’s reading. You see, Nicodemus was an expert in spiritual and religious matters. He was from a group of scholars who knew *everything* there was to know about the religious tradition they shared with Jesus, and made sure that everyone who listened to them followed certain procedures for relating to God. There were certain ways to know God—certain rules and

¹ Thanks to Rev. Dr. Andrea Avayyzian for reminding me of the potency of John 3:16a.

procedures that needed to be heeded. If God was not fixed and unchanging, the ways of knowing God certainly were.

Nicodemus was not an obscure Rabbi from some hick town doing a tour like Jesus. He was a respected leader of their people. And Nicodemus was even a particular expert of their traditions—a Rev. Dr., if you will, who was talking to a self-appointed minister from a sketchy backwater town. (This might explain why the Rev. Dr. Nicodemus snuck out to see Jesus at night time—it was better not to be seen in case things didn't work out.)

On some level it is truly amazing that Nicodemus went to see Jesus *at all*. Yet he did, and he appears to go to see him out of sincere respect. When he meets Jesus, he offers him praise which a religious authority figure would not lavish on someone loosely. He says “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*.”² First the Rev. Dr. Nicodemus calls Jesus a Rabbi—literally *a teacher*, which a religious authority would not call *just anyone*—and then he acknowledges that Jesus somehow has access to the presence of God, which grants Jesus a high level of authority. In a way it is truly odd that Nicodemus would grant Jesus *so much* authority at this stage in his ministry. We are in the beginning of the third chapter of John's Gospel here. So far Jesus has been baptized, called some disciples, changed water into wine and scourged the Temple. There have been no major healings, no extended sermons, no raising people from the dead, and no prophecies. Yet something in the way Jesus has performed these initial acts has Nicodemus connecting Jesus with God's presence. And not *just* Nicodemus—because he speaks on behalf of some unnamed group—“Rabbi, *we know* that you are a teacher *who has come from God*...”

A respected religious expert comes knocking on the door, acknowledging the authority of Jesus, apparently seeking something. But before the Rev. Dr. can say what it is Jesus jumps right into theology with him. Jesus says “Very truly, I tell you, *no one* can see the kingdom of God *without being born from above*.”³

Naturally this throws Nicodemus for a loop. He was just in the middle of greeting Jesus when WHAM—he throws down! So they fumble around for quite some time, eventually figuring out that Jesus is not talking about some strange rebirth of the physical body, but instead is about spiritual change, a *birth of water and the Spirit*. (Note the capital “s” in this version of the Bible, it is a hint!) On a casual listen, it sounds like they might be arguing the particulars of baptism, but the Jewish people had already been engaging in ritual cleansings with water for many generations by that point. The ritual bathing pools for preparing to go the Temple were called mikva'ot, or a mikvah when there was only one of them. And there were many reasons to cleanse oneself before making an offering or paying a visit to the Temple.

²John 3:2b.

³John 3:3b.

So, it couldn't be the water part that was confusing Nicodemus. It must have been the Spirit and being born parts. It was one thing to be washed and made ready for a ritual, but what's this being *born* from *water* and *Spirit* and *above* stuff all about?

And that *right there* is evidence that Talking Heads were wrong about Heaven and that many Christian hymns are wrong to call God unchanging—because Christ's invitation to be born from above of water and the Spirit is a dynamic action on God's part. It is the initiation of something new. It is also an invitation to meet God half-way!

Jesus says: “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.’”⁴ In other words, we are all born human—able to accomplish much, but also prone to fail and stumble—that's the flesh that is born of flesh. In order to receive God's grace, we need to open ourselves to God's Spirit in order to refresh, enliven and lift up our own spirits.

The idea that humans could invite the Holy Spirit directly into their lives was a new and different approach for Judaism, which some Rev. Drs. of that tradition would come to call blasphemy. And Jesus framed it as something which God was *receiving*, too. Not only do our human souls aspire toward God, God's Holy Spirit comes down to us. Not only do we yearn for spiritual experiences, but God yearns for a human experience.

We see this especially in the person of Jesus Christ, who embodies humanity and divinity at once. “No one has ascended *into* heaven except the one who *descended* from heaven, the Son of Man.”⁵ While John's Gospel refers to Jesus as God's Son and the Son of Man in this reading, it is also the only Gospel to have Jesus proclaim that he and God are one.⁶

So, why would God try this new and dynamic way of relating to people? Why would God walk in our shoes? That question brings us to the *very best* verse in this complicated scripture: “For God so loved the world...”⁷ There is so much to God which is beyond human experience, how could God know what it was like to be human by remaining forever beyond us? God couldn't. And the Christian belief is that God didn't! God so loved the world that the infinite and immortal God walked the earth as a frail and fragile human to know what limits were like; to learn what our limits really were. God so loved the world that eternal Spirit took on worldly flesh to know us from the inside. What was all Spirit was born of flesh so that all flesh might become eternal Spirit.

⁴ John 3:6-7.

⁵ John 3:13

⁶ John 10:30.

⁷ John 3:16a.

God so loved the world that God remained—and remains--flexible and open to human experience. God so loved the world that God continues to find ways for flesh and Spirit to dance and grown closer and closer together.

God so loved the world that the flesh and Spirit of Jesus came into the world not to condemn it, but in order that the world might be saved. Not just *our personal world*. Not the places we feel safe and as though we can place limitations about what God may become in our lives. Not just the world of our own personal faith, or tribe, or country as we have known them to be. But also all the places we may yet go n our journey with God. God's grace is on offer for the *whole* world. God's grace is open to everyone. God yearns to know humanity just as we yearn to know God. God is dynamic and always expanding and seeking out new and creative ways to meet us halfway, even while drawing us into wider possibilities and a bigger love. God so loves the world, that God keeps working with the world. Not my world. Not your world. The whole world! And that's the good news of the Gospel of John this morning.

Amen.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2He 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.” 3Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 4Nicodemus 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?” 5Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ 8The 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.” 9Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11“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. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16“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. 17“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.