

“Twice Born Sojourners”

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John 3:1-17

“When were you saved?”

For some of us, that question has an easy answer. For some of us there was a date and place we can state with certainty because we had an authentic and dramatic experience with God at that precise time. For others of us it is not an easy answer as we have not all had such a dramatic experience of salvation ~ it feels more like a long process of coming to God rather than an single moment.



However we have experienced it, as a flash or as a long process, often this passage from the Gospel of John is close at hand, a part of the process:

“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.”

One of the most beloved, if not the most quoted and well known single verses from the New Testament. In the narrative it comes up in a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the so-called “night visit” at the beginning of Chapter 3 in John’s Gospel. Nicodemus come praising Jesus for his signs and wonders and:

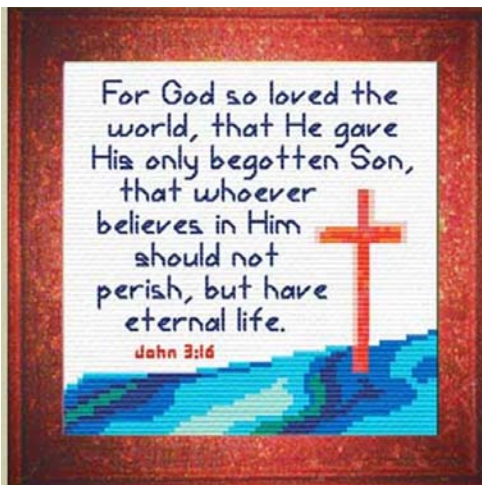
Jesus answered Nicodemus, *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”*

Here Jesus is quoted as using a term in Greek which has a double meaning ~ it could mean “born again” but more faithfully should be translated “born from above.” Nicodemus, with his worldly and literal mind, missed the double meaning completely (as did the King James Bible translators as well). So Jesus corrects him.

Here the conversation borders on the absurd. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb?” Even when Jesus patiently explains that he did not mean at all “born a second time,” but rather that the truth is that

“no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above” that is, no one can experience God’s kingdom salvation without a spiritual birth, not just a physical one.

Nicodemus is still stuck. “How can these things be?”



The kingdom of God and the experience of salvation found within it is the very central theme of Jesus' entire message. In the four Gospels, the kingdom is described by Jesus no less than 123 times in 114 verses.



Only two of those verses are in John's Gospel – both in our text today. God's reign is the primary way Matthew, Mark and Luke speak of salvation. John prefers a different term for God's kingdom: "eternal life" or better translated "life for the ages," as "eternal life" gives the mistaken impression that we can only experience it sometime later after death, which is clearly not Jesus' intention.

How do we know this? How do we know "eternal life" and "the kingdom of God" are equivalent for John. Because in explaining **"no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from above"** he declares that **"whoever believes in him (that is, Jesus, the Son of Man) may have life for the ages."** Entering God's reign and inheriting eternal life are the same thing, and also equated with salvation itself for all four of the Gospel writers. Jesus wants us to experience life in God's reign, life for the ages right now and tomorrow and next week and forever.



Building on what Jesus says here about **"the wind blows where it**

chooses, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" and that is how it is with those **"born of the Spirit,"** we can see that Jesus is saying clearly to Nicodemus, and to us, that those **"born of the Spirit/born again/born from above"** have been gifted by the Spirit with the capacity for discerning God's work in the world to bring God's reign into reality. The once born, the single born do have this capacity.



If this is indeed true, what does it look like when we gain this gift of discernment, when we enter God's kingdom in all its saving power and experience salvation as life for all the ages, experienced in its fullness from this moment on?

Bu Ngahingsi was our cook and a good one when we worked with the small Christian community in Indonesia. We called her affectionately Bu Nih, or "Mother Nih.". [left in the photo =>]

Bu Nih was a Muslim, a second wife to an abusive husband with four wives and mistresses to boot. Four wives who supported him, but he never helped his wives financially or otherwise. Bu Nih cared for her aged mother and a son Dahma, my son's age. They just barely made it, what with her husband's demands to support his gambling and carousing.

Bu Nih became a Christian. The day she was baptized with Dahma was a truly transcendent experience. I would love to take credit for her conversion, but it was the indigenous Christians who deserve all the credit.



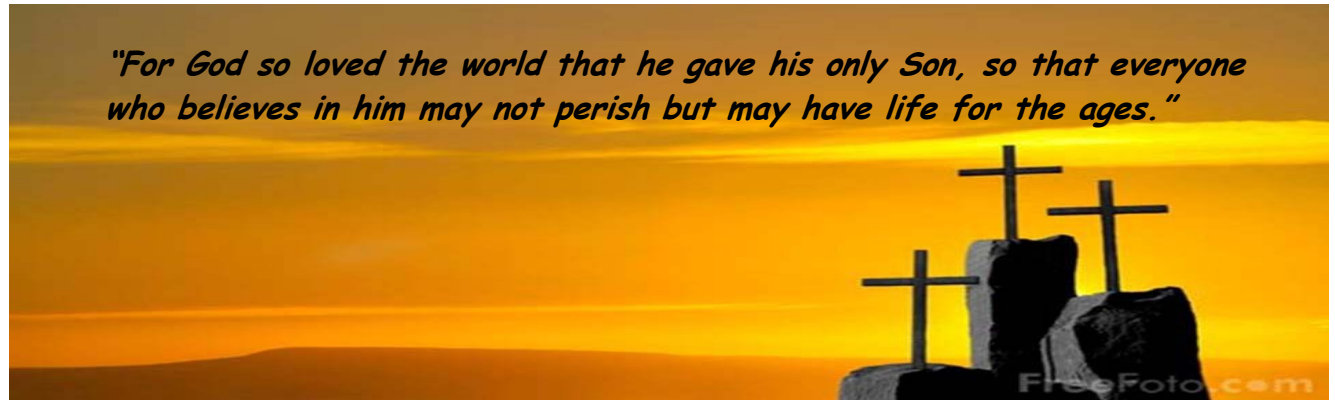
Her conversion came about slowly, deliberately through the neighborhood outreach of the local Javanese church. They offered neighborhood based classes in Christianity and support

groups and prayer groups. Bu Nih attended, was attracted by what she saw and eventually converted.

I wondered why she became a disciple. It was certainly not for prestige in the community's eye for she lost what little she had when she converted. Why would she leave her tradition and majority status to join a minority, and a persecuted minority at that?

I learned an important truth about the faith. For in the Christian fellowship her gifts were celebrated, her personhood respected.

She was no longer the second wife of an abusive husband. She was no longer viewed as an uneducated, urban peasant woman with no prospects. She was no longer just a cook. Bu Nih was now a child of God, a person with dignity, respected and loved. How did she know she was loved? Because:



Kingdom life - experienced now, tomorrow, next year – and forever. She was no longer viewed from a human perspective but in our kingdom community she was viewed “from above.”

Who would not gladly make the same exchange?!!

Bu Nih was busy being born from above, busy entering God's reign, busy experiencing God's saving power in her daily life. Nicodemus, we suspect, was not. All the baggage of being a person of status and success in this world had to hold him back from being “born from above” for the very first time.



What of us? Are we busy being born? What could be holding us back?

A pastor I knew, Asa Hunt working off the “serpent lifted up in the wilderness,” talked about the toxic snakes in our lives which hold us back from entering God's reign and prevent us from obtaining the gift of spiritual discernment. He uses the helpful memory device of a hand. He says each finger represents one of the toxic snakes:

- The thumb = ‘hurry up’ – busyness and overwork
- The index finger = ‘be perfect’ – perfectionism and obsession
- The middle finger (longest) = ‘be strong’ – arrogance and self-sufficiency (I don't need God)
- The third finger (not so tall) = ‘try harder’ – over striving and competition (I can do it all myself)

- The pinky (the smallest) = ‘please me’ – self-centeredness and narcissism
(It’s all about me)

All these distract us from our call – pull us off the path – derail us from our God given rights as children of God. Being born from above gifts us the spiritual discernment to put it all in perspective, to balance our lives, to gain spiritual health by seeing with eyes of the spirit where God has already changed our world for the better.

“**W**hen were you saved?”



However we have experienced it, as a flash or as a long process, it is often clearly felt as our personal decision to follow Jesus ~ our personal choice to turn to God. That is certainly an authentic experience of God. In no way to denigrate and in no way to diminish those experiences, indeed to praise and envy those who have had them. However: it is true that *we love, because God first loved us.*

Thus, the time and place we decided to follow Jesus is rather the time and place we became aware of God’s love and grace already present and effective in our lives – we become aware at a personal and experiential level. Yes, we decided for Jesus, but we are able to decide precisely because God decided for us so long before.

So if asked “when were you saved?” ~ rightly understood the answer is not a time or place within our lifetime nor a longer process in our life experience, but the more accurate answer is:

“When were you saved?”

“I was saved 2000 years ago on a Cross on Calvary.”

