

## **Wherever it wishes**

John 3:1-17

March 20, 2011

Open our eyes, Lord! We want to see Jesus!

Because Jesus is the embodiment of God's word. Because Jesus is the embodiment of God's heart. Because Jesus is the embodiment of all that God is. When we see him, when we recognize him, when we know him, we will know God.

But sometimes we don't see him. Sometimes we don't recognize him. Sometimes we are blind to what he wants to show us and deaf to what he wants to tell us.

Sometimes, because we don't notice him, because we are too preoccupied with the cares and worries and desires of our own lives.

Sometimes, because we're looking for somebody else, something else, something that will make our lives easier not harder.

Sometimes, because we're not looking for him or anybody else, because we're sure we don't need anybody else.

And sometimes, we don't recognize Jesus because we don't want to, because if we did see what he wants to show us, if we did listen to he wants to tell us, we know we would have to change. That's how it was, wasn't it, with the wealthy young man who came to Jesus asking him what he needed to do to receive eternal life? He walked away disappointed, not seeing, not hearing, because if he allowed himself to see and to hear, he would have to change.

But that's not how it was with Nicodemus. Nicodemus did notice Jesus. He went looking for Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a man dedicated to knowing and doing the will of God, and he seemed ready, ready to listen to whatever word from God Jesus might have for him, ready even to do whatever it was that word from God required of him.

Nicodemus came to Jesus with open eyes and open ears, but he didn't see. He didn't get it. Sometimes people like Nicodemus -- intelligent people, sincere people, well-intentioned people, people who really do want to see -- don't.

Why not?

I call it a failure of imagination, an inability of the mind, of the imagination, to grasp an idea that lies outside its “field of vision.” Nicodemus cannot make sense of new words that are not already part of his vocabulary. Nicodemus doesn’t know what to do with new concepts that don’t fit into the carefully defined categories by which his perception of the world is organized.

“I must be born again? How can this be?”

Nicodemus seems to take Jesus’ words literally, too literally.

“No grown man can return to his mother’s womb and be born a second time!”

But he’s a smart man. Maybe he’s just being sarcastic, trying to provoke Jesus into saying something else, something that makes more sense, by showing Jesus how ridiculous his words sounds.

“Tell me, Jesus, just tell me what I have to do!”

But Jesus persists.

“Don’t be surprised, Nicodemus, when I tell you that everyone must be born again.”

Everyone. You and everybody else!

“How can this be? How can this be? Just tell me what I have to do?”

Tell me what I have to do. We all want to know what we have to do. Because we are convinced that salvation, righteousness, the good life, a life that is good, is something we must achieve. We’ve got to do it. We’ve got to do something to earn it, one way or another.

Isn’t that true? Isn’t it true even among us children of the reformation who are careful to say that salvation comes by faith, not by works? It still comes down to achievement! Faith is just another achievement!

I am saved by my faith, by my belief, by my well-informed and properly articulated faith, by my correct belief. And as for those whose belief is not so correct, whose faith is not well-informed, but misplaced or misguided? Well ... to hell with them!

It’s a sad irony that so many who call themselves Christians, who identify themselves as followers of Jesus, spend so much time and energy drawing lines in the sand, separating the sheep from the goats, judging, excluding,

condemning ... while Jesus himself says: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it!"

That's all right Jesus. You don't have to worry about condemning all the miscreants and misfits of this world. We'll take care of that for you!

Rob Bell released a new book this week. You may not have heard of Rob Bell. I'd heard of him before, but knew little about him. He's better known in other church circles, among the non-denominational, evangelical churches.

He's the founding pastor of an independent evangelical church in Michigan that meets in an former shopping mall and welcomes 8,000-10,000 worshippers each Sunday. He's a popular speaker, author, and the star of NOOMA, a series of short teaching ministry videos.

His new book, *Love Wins*, is subtitled: *A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. OK. That's a rather audacious title, not the title I would choose, but apparently, that's his style. I don't have the book and have not read it, but I have read reviews and have read about the enormous controversy the book has provoked.

Bell has been skewered by a wide range of evangelical critics, attacking his theology, accusing him of heresy, intimating that he has abandoned true biblical faith, suggesting that, for all practical purposes, he has gone over to the dark side. One reviewer wrote:

*The theology is heterodox. The history is inaccurate. The impact on souls is devastating. And the use of Scripture is indefensible. Worst of all, "Love Wins" demeans the cross and misrepresents God's character.*

And all because Rob Bell dares to suggest that it is God's intention to reconcile all of creation -- all of creation! -- to himself, and because he dares to suggest that God will accomplish what God intends to accomplish. Love wins!

Boo! You can't say that! You can't say that everyone will be in heaven! You can't say that some people won't go to hell! If you say that, what difference does my faith make? What purpose does evangelism serve? What did Jesus do for?

Exactly! What did Jesus die for? For what purpose did Jesus come among us -- to live and to heal and to teach and to die, and to be raised to new life? For what purpose and for whose sake? For the sake of some, but not all? For the sake of those, only those, who merit the blessings of God's grace by their belief?

When we claim that God's justice demands that every unbeliever be damned to hell, while every believer be raised to heaven, whom are we defending? Are we defending God's honor by saying that God's intention to save all creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus ... failed?

*God loved the world ... God loved the world so much that God gave the world his Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.*

See! There it is! "Everyone who believes in him." If you don't believe, you die!

Really? Is that what Jesus means? Let's take another look at the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Does Jesus tell Nicodemus, "You must believe?" No, he does not. Jesus tells him, "Everyone must be born again."

*No one can see God's kingdom without being born again.*

You do not see God's kingdom, you do not come to know God, by trying a little harder, by keeping the rules a little better, by learning the secret to what it is that pleases God most. You do not see God's kingdom by doing anything.

You see God's kingdom by being born -- again! By being entirely transformed! You must become a whole new you!

And tell me, how do you do that? How do you go about being born again?

Well, tell me, how did you go about being born the first time, out of water, out of the water of your mother's womb? You didn't go about it at all! You had nothing to do with it! Your mother birthed you!

And the same is true, Jesus says, when you are born again. You have nothing to do with it! The Spirit births you! And you better not go around thinking you can figure out how or when or where or why the Spirit is going to do that, because the Spirit is like the wind. It blows wherever it wishes! You see its effects, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. That's how it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Are we saved by our faith? No, we are saved by God's grace. But we are saved through our faith, through believing in Jesus. We do not believe in order to be born again. We believe that through Jesus and by Jesus, we have been born again. We believe that the Spirit has birthed us into new life, into a new way of existence.

We can refuse to believe. We can refuse to live the new life we have been given, but it is not in our power to give that life or to take it away. And it is not in our power to say who it is who has been given eternal life and who has not.

That power belongs to God and God alone. And God will do whatever God wishes! You can see what God does, but it is not for you to know where he comes from or where he is going!

Faith is an exercise of imagination, of laying aside prejudices, of venturing past the strict limits of our customary ways of thinking, of seeing and hearing everything from an entirely new perspective, of opening our eyes and our hearts to see the wonder of what God has done.

To see the wonder of what God has done, for me and for you and for all humanity!

To see the wonder of what God has done through the gift of his Son, Jesus.

To see the wonder of what God has done because God loves the world, so much!

Open our eyes, Lord!