

# Getting a Sense of Things

A Sermon Expositing John 3:1-17

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Something begins the moment we are born. Life, yes, life begins in all its complexity, but something more basic begins as well. The moment you and I entered the world our ability to know and be known began. Fledgling as it may have been, our senses began to come on line in a more complete way than they could in utero. The hazy mixtures of light in different intensities and kinds, the strange tones and notes, textures, tastes, fragrances began to organize themselves in our minds. One of the first things we deduced about the world is that there are others like us, and of these others there are a few to whom we are bonded more deeply than the rest. Theirs was the first smell we grew attached to, the first flesh we learned to recognize by touch, they provided the first nourishment we would taste, and their names were among the first words we could voice, “mommy” or “daddy”. In the years we’ve all spent growing up, our experience of others and their experience of us has been bound up in these same sensory experiences.

We’ve tried to reduce the need for certain of these senses in the process of knowing and being known, but we’re beginning to realize that to do so is impossible, and ultimately undesirable. We began with the written word. In the complete absence of another, we could write letters and in fact they have conveyed great parts of relationship – love letters, letters home from war – they’ve proven to us the adage that absence does indeed sometimes make the heart grow fonder. We needed more, so we developed the technology to broadcast a voice over a great distance, the telephone. We’ve sped up the process and even now given ourselves the ability to lay eyes on one another in “real time” they call it. In so doing we’ve learned that our ability to know and be known is, for better or for worse, tied to physicality.

But what if the relationship to be considered is the one between self and God? Everyone we’ve ever known, we’ve experienced through our senses. Everyone we’ve ever made ourselves known to, we’ve done so physically. That isn’t an option when it is the ultimate spiritual existence, God, we’re trying to relate to.

I think that’s what underlies our desire to turn Lent into a season of “Stop It!” as we mentioned last week. If I can’t relate to God another way, perhaps there is a *thing* that I must stop saying or doing. Not that behavior in physical existence is entirely unrelated to relating to God, let’s not forget who gave us these physical bodies, but we may tend to over physicalize our spirituality at times. How many in this world have thrown out any claims Christianity may make simply because the idea of a continued physical existence in heaven or hell, a popular modern understanding, seems preposterous? At the other end of the spectrum where heaven and hell *are* the sum total of Christian teaching, they’ve been said to be comprised of beautiful streets of gold on the one hand, and unending painful torment on the other. The highest goal of *spiritual* experience has become physical! That makes it difficult to turn inward, to the spiritual. I think that was Nicodemus’s trouble too.

Some have accused Nicodemus of being dense seemingly taking Jesus’s metaphor about being born again literally. I think though that we should give a Pharisee, a scholar of the law and teacher of the people a

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Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

little more credit than that. Maybe he understands Jesus' metaphor of rebirth as spiritual, but simply finds the idea incredulous. "What do you mean with this 'born from above' stuff?" Eugene Peterson paraphrases the question. Nicodemus seems to be a "what you see is what you get" kind of guy, which I think is what Jesus was responding to. Look back at Nicodemus's confession at the beginning. "We know that you are from God," he says, "because no one can do these *signs* that you are doing apart from God." His entire understanding of who Jesus is comes from seeing *things* happen, it's bound up in the physical!

We know though that the physical is not all there is to reality, we know that there is more to this life than what we can observe with these five senses don't we? Haven't many of us in this room experienced a moment when all the world was transformed – by love. Romantic love is so *real* that simply by meeting one person along life's journey, goals, moods, temperaments, entire core narratives can change at a moment's notice for better or for worse. Taking a partner in our culture gives us different ways of seeing and hearing and sensing the world around us – the seen is changed by the unseen.

Romantic love isn't the "born again" experience Jesus is getting at with Nicodemus, but we can at least recognize there are parts of reality that we can't see or smell or touch, but we know – we know – they're real. It just so happens that, for the moment, we access all that is wonderful and lovely and true in the spiritual realm through the physical, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness..." Jesus says. He recalls a story from his own faith tradition, a time when his ancestors in faith bemoaned God, which brought upon them a plague of poisonous snakes and many died of their bites. After Moses called out on their behalf, God instructed him to fashion a bronze serpent atop a high pole where everyone could see. The idea was that in *seeing* an emblem, a very physical emblem of God's redemption their hearts might be turned from groaning to trust. The material becomes the spiritual.

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," says Jesus, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up." He will be lifted up as we know, on a Roman cross for all to see. It will be an act of *physical* violence. Bone will be broken, flesh torn, blood spilled. Those who travel this journey with Jesus will see these things with their eyes, they will hear his dying cry, they will gather in a room and taste the bread and the wine, they will touch his broken body, and they will smell the stench of death. The journey to the cross and beyond is known in body, physically, but its effect will be experienced most fully in a place that is not known by these five senses.

We too continue on this journey to the cross. We will mark our journey perhaps with fasting or abstaining for a time from something physical, meaningful, but our goal is not hunger nor deprivation, but to identify with suffering. We may at times assume physical postures in prayer, we will certainly taste a holy meal, we will look upon ancient symbols – the color purple, palm leaves, crosses. We don't practice it as much in our tradition, but the church universal will even find the fragrance of incense among their prayers, and before it is all over we will hear the deafening thunder of a tomb slammed shut. We will know lent in our bodies, we will see Christ lifted up, but the truth of this matter will be known somewhere outside of our bodies. That then is the best news of all, for bodies may wither and die, but there is far more to this life than the physical. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever trusts in him will not die, but have everlasting life. Amen.