

Children of the Living God

John 3:1-17

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In January of 1996, I moved from Mississippi to Virginia to become the Dean of Students at Virginia Tech. I led a staff of 11, and together we were responsible for new student orientation, student conduct hearings, disability services, and multi-cultural programs. In addition, I was in charge of the whole campus's emergency response – when a student came down with meningitis, or was hospitalized for alcohol poisoning; whenever there was a fire in a student apartment complex or a balcony collapsed; when a student had a mental health crisis; when a student died – I was in charge of the response. In the most serious cases, I was the one who personally stepped in to deal with the situation. The same was true for any student about whom a faculty member expressed a concern – a student who had stopped coming to classes, or one who was behaving in a bizarre or concerning way. This emergency response role was a little like being the one and only pastor for a community of 30,000 students, faculty, and staff, but with all the legal restrictions that come with working in a state-run institution, and all the politics of any huge organization. I was really ready for some portions of that job and not at all ready for others.

So, I was overwhelmed in my work. That job chewed me up and spat me out. At the same time, at home, my marriage of 25 years was falling apart. There was no soft place anywhere in my life. It was a VERY stressful time.

I stuck it out in that job for three years, but eventually, I knew that something had to change. In fact, EVERYTHING had to change. My own life depended on it. So, I told my vice president, "It's time to move me to a different position. Let someone else have all this fun for a while." And I told my husband that it was time for us to part ways at last. Both of those conversations were difficult, but they were absolutely necessary.

Now, it took several months for all those changes to work themselves out, but there came a singular moment on July 1 of the following year when I suddenly had a whole new life – all at once! On June 30, I was dean of students, still carrying the whole responsibility for keeping students safe, even though they insisted on putting their lives in danger. The very next day, on July 1, I was in a new role with new tasks and goals that I could actually accomplish. It felt like the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders.

At the very same time, on June 30, I was still Cathryn Goree, the woman with the dour expression on her face. But on July 1, I was Cathy Turrentine once again, and another great weight was lifted. I had left my own life behind, and everything from that moment forward would be something new.

Eventually, I stopped walking on air, of course. I woke up once again in the world where my limbs had weight that tethered me to the ground. But I never again let myself get in a situation that was so wrong for me. Because I can remember what it was like to be under water in every area of my life. I can remember what it was like to feel that I was drowning. And I can remember what it was like to throw off the weight of all that and simply choose to LIVE.

I share this story because it is the most vivid HUMAN example I can think of, of being transformed, of getting a wholly fresh start. And I think it gives us a tiny hint of what Jesus means in today's scripture.

Nicodemus, the Pharisee, comes to Jesus by night, because he really wants to understand the Kingdom of God and he believes Jesus has the answers. But he is embarrassed to be seen with Jesus in the broad daylight.

Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus doesn't understand. You see, the Greek word for "again" (as in "born again") is the same as the word for "from above." Jesus is saying that Nicodemus must receive a new life "from above" – from the Kingdom of God – and all Nicodemus can hear is the need to crawl back into his mother's womb and come forth again, unchanged, into this same old, leaden world. But that's not what Jesus wants for him. Not more of this same life, but a different kind of life entirely.

The Gospel of John is the most spiritual of all the gospels, and the understanding of eternal life that it presents is entirely different than we see in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, or in the letters of Paul. In this gospel, an encounter with Jesus provokes a choice in us. Once we have met him, we simply cannot be the same people we were before. Encountering Jesus calls us to live as Children of the Light, as John would say. It calls us into a whole new way of being. This is being "born again" – to be children, not of this world, but of the Living God.

In the Gospel of John, eternal life isn't something we get after we die (though we have it then, too). For John, the choice isn't between going to

heaven or to hell. For John, the choice is between plodding through our lives, tethered to the earth physically and spiritually, or floating through this life, like walking on air, with our eyes on eternity.

If we live every day in the light of our encounter with Jesus, then we will be tinglingly alive. Lovingly alive. Passionately alive. We will be radiant with God's light. John thinks we can feel that way every single day. I know I am not able to do that. But I have experienced – however briefly – what it is like to live at the intersection of our own time and God's eternity. That experience colors my life, even when I am not walking on air.

God does not ask us to crawl back into our mother's wombs and come forth yet again – unchanged – as children of this earth, as Nicodemus believed. Instead, God asks us to claim our rightful place as children of God. We walk in the light of God's love every single day. May we all trust God every day to bring about that transformation in us.

Amen