

### 6.3.18

#### Transactional or Transformational?

Isaiah 6:1-8

John 3:1-17

This week the texts are familiar ones. And with familiarity we are challenged to read with new eyes and hear with new ears what God is saying. A little secret: preachers, at least this preacher, does not like preaching on texts like this because they are so familiar.

Reading scripture we have heard so many times brings more challenge to the text. John 3:1-17 contains one of the most familiar verses in the world, and we are asked to find new meaning. Isaiah 6:1-8 is the story of the call of Isaiah. Isaiah has a dramatic encounter with the living God that inspires him to say, "Here I am; send me."

In John, Nicodemus has an encounter where Jesus challenges Nicodemus to move from theory to practice, from knowledge to faith, from curiosity to commitment. Nicodemus is called to a fuller, deeper experience that goes beyond knowing or the cognitive. He is called into a living, transformative relationship that encompasses his whole being. We are asked is our faith transactional (If we do this God will do that) or transformational (Our whole life is changed and we live in a new way).

The writer portrays Nicodemus as a learned man with impressive credentials, describing him not only as a Pharisee but as "a ruler of the Jews." Nicodemus thinks that he, as a religious leader, understands who Jesus is and who God is. Jesus calls his understanding into question. Like a typical scholar, Nicodemus begins the conversation with a statement based on evidence. "We know" that Jesus is a teacher come from God. How do we know? We know by observation, logic, and deduction. Jesus' signs provide convincing proof that God is with him. Though Nicodemus is not wrong in his conclusion, he is not completely right either. His perception is partial and incomplete. Lacking both courage and commitment, he has come to visit Jesus by night. Far from being a follower of Jesus, he is unwilling even to be seen with him.

Jesus' response to Nicodemus' opening statement cuts straight to the heart of the matter: no one can see God's reign without being born again or anew or from above (the Greek word *anōthen* can be translated "again," "anew," and "from above," and all are important here). Unless Nicodemus allows God to change his whole way of being in the world, he will not be able to perceive God at work. Nicodemus promptly demonstrates his lack of understanding by missing Jesus' wordplay and taking Jesus at the most literal level. Mystified, he asks, "How can anyone be born after growing old?" Jesus explains that by water and the Spirit, God gives people rebirth into the reign of God. Those who are reborn in this way become new beings, shaped and sustained by the Spirit who transforms them.

This passage challenges the transactional understanding of salvation that many people seem to have, where, if you do X, God has to do Y. Jesus wants Nicodemus and us to come to a new understanding, where salvation is more about transformation than transaction, about living a new life here and now, and not only there and then.

When we become too sure of what we know about Jesus or what we have to do (transactional), when we believe that we have grasped him at last, that is when we can expect to be undone like Nicodemus. That undoing, that overturning of our certainty, may be a very good thing if it allows us to experience anew the miracle of our birth from above (transformational), which has little to do with what we know or acting in a certain way. It is a gift of life from the heart of God, breathing the Spirit over us and through us, and opening our eyes to the Son, our Teacher, who showed us how to draw all people to together and share his lesson of grace and unconditional love.

Think about it – Pray about it – Live it

Bob