

In early November, our pastoral staff and spouses joined a few hundred other Alliance pastors and spouses from across B.C. Over a 3 day period we retreated in Whistler, enjoying good food, fun, worship, and prayer; it's something Naomi and I look forward to every year. Sometimes I go to the Retreat, desperate for rest, or feeling a keen need to receive from God, but this year I went with a sense of rest in heart.

This year two of our pastoral couples—Brendan and Emily, Paul and Jina—brought their respective babies with them, Jacob and Isaiah. And for 3 days Naomi and I caught a tiny glimpse of what it must be like to be a grandparent. In many of the sessions, as people gathered for worship, prayer, and teaching, Naomi and I stood at the back of the room, rocking, walking, and whispering to Jacob and Isaiah.

When they fell asleep, we held them a little bit longer, a little bit tighter, marvelling over their beautiful fingers and toes, ears, eyes, and noses. We prayed that like their namesakes, Jacob the Patriarch, and Isaiah the Prophet, that these two would grow into mighty men of God. And when Jacob and Isaiah cried, or needed to be changed, we gave them back to their parents. Isn't that what grandparents do?

The point I'm trying to make is that new birth is miraculous. I've seen many sets of fingers and toes, eyes, ears, and noses, and yet, each child is a miracle, worthy of awe, wonder, and celebration. In November, Brendan and Emily, Paul and Jina, gave Naomi and me that gift when we held Jacob and Isaiah.

When God the Son became human, born of Mary, for the first time in human history, the promise of spiritual birth became possible. Jesus

once said, "*Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the [Holy] Spirit gives birth to spirit...you must be born again.*" The words I've just read come from John 3:6,7, but this idea of being spiritually reborn is first found in Prologue of John's Gospel. In John 1:10-13, John speaks about Jesus in terms of the welcome He received—He was rejected by many, embraced by some, and those who received Him were spiritually reborn.

Perhaps you're here today, hoping to make a fresh start, to have the slate wiped clean; I'm glad you're here—may God grant you the capacity to see and hear Jesus this morning.

If you have a Bible with you, paper or electronic, let me invite you to turn with to John 1:10-13; that's page 860 in the Blue Bibles.

I'm going to begin my reading in verse 9, "*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*"

If verse 9 begins with a soaring vision of Jesus, *the true light that bring light to everyone*, then verses 10 and 11 depict a more sober reality. In spite of the light Jesus brings and the invitation He offers, not everyone will receive Jesus. And while John doesn't entertain the question here, perhaps you—like me—wonder *why? Why do so many refuse Jesus?* We'll come back to this question in a moment but for now, let's deal with what John does say.

**Vs. 10:** In vs. 10, the word “*world*” is repeated three times. **First**, we are told that, “He”—the Word, the Incarnate Son, Jesus—was *in* the *world*. The emphasis in the original language is that Jesus didn’t pop in for a visit, here for a moment and then gone. No, He was fully committed; He was all-in, so to speak.

**Second**, John reminds us that the *world was made through Him*. From a biblical perspective, the world—and all that is in it—is bound to Him; we are creatures and He is the Creator. **Third**, the *world did not recognize Him*. And herein lies the great irony, where there should have been recognition and receptivity, there was dullness of eye, mind and heart. One author suggests that similar to Mary and Joseph’s experience in Bethlehem, when Jesus came to the world, no room was made for Him.<sup>1</sup>

**Vs. 11:** Vs. 11 reads, “*He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.*” Language scholars suggest that a more literal translation might read, “*He came to His own home*” but He was not received. Metaphorically speaking, Jesus came home to find the front door shut; humanity locked Him out.

When God the Son became human, He didn’t come to strangers—as an outsider; He came to Israel, to God’s own people. He came to those who were praying to Him, trusting in Him, anticipating His coming, and many of these praying, trusting, waiting people, rejected Him.

And so we return to the question I asked earlier, “*Why?*” *Why didn’t more people receive Jesus when He came? And why, 2000 years later, does the same dullness of mind and heart exist when it comes to people receiving Jesus?*

During the Advent Season, Christians make a point of describing Jesus as the One in whom humanity finds salvation and satisfaction. With the coming of Jesus, we find **love**: love that comforts, nourishes, and heals—a love that lasts. With the coming of Jesus, we find **peace**: peace with God, peace within, peace with others. With the coming of Jesus, we find **joy and hope**. By faith we know that our past and present sorrows do not have the final word; the goodness of God sustains us in the present and gives us hope for the future.

While this is the Christian confession, many of our family, friends, and neighbours do not know Jesus; my concern is that many people reject Him without ever really considering Him.

- Some people do not receive Jesus because they’ve never been told about Him. Most of my friends and neighbours have never read the Bible or regularly attended Church; how could they know about Jesus? And that’s the crux of the problem...many think they do know, and have heard—they’ve seen enough on the news or in movies to give them an impression of the Christian story. What they don’t know is that they’ve been offered a caricature of Jesus that bears little resemblance to the real thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary M. Burge, *NIV Application Commentary: John*, 58.

Islam itself tells a version of Jesus that is a far cry from the Bible's witness. Jesus the Prophet, Jesus a good man, but not more—certainly not God the Son, who died on the cross to reconcile humanity to God. Islam's version of Jesus is based on half-truths.

- Some people don't make a conscious choice to reject Jesus, it's more a matter of not knowing what His life has to do with their life, and besides, they're too busy seeking a life that satisfies.

Among the great lies told and retold throughout history, there is perhaps none more sinister than this: **things can, and will, satisfy your heart's hunger**. Set your eye upon them, put them on your Christmas list, pursue them with all your vigour, and when—finally—your hand possesses it, or them, your heart will be satisfied.

Most people have never considered the possibility that lasting peace, hope, joy, and love are connected to a Person. If we've been made for God, nothing and none one else will ever satisfy. You can take my word for it, but you probably won't. Many people learn the hard way, exhausting every avenue before they are ready to consider Jesus.

And the problem is that there are hundreds of ways to avoid Jesus. Over-working, Netflix binging, buying, eating, travelling, remodelling your house, dating someone new, going out with friends, exploring alcohol, and recreational drugs. There's almost nothing we won't do to dull the ache of our hearts.

**illus:** I've got a picture on the screen behind me; can anyone tell me what this item is? Correct, this pair of earphones are known as AirPods, but do you know what I call them? To my children I affectionately refer to them as Dork pods—because they look really

dorky. But I'm less concerned about what the way they look, and more concerned about what they represent. AirPods are not the problem, they are a symptom of a problem. Laptops, tablets and smartphones make it possible to be on the move and yet remain constantly connected to noise. Like the character Golem, and his ring, these devices are *precious* to us; we've become compulsive.

Compulsive streaming—music, Youtube, Tick Tock, movies, podcasts—a deluge of image and word that crowds out the ability to listen.

*Who am I? Why am I here? And what is this thing we call life? Am I a drifter, hurtling through a cosmos without meaning or purpose? Am I free to choose for myself which path to follow, not knowing which path, if any, will lead to satisfaction? Or, am I living in a created world, one of inherent purpose and meaning, in which case my life, and my place in this world really matters?*

For many, these questions are held at bay because AirPods don't stream these questions—they drown them out. Instead of filling the silence with noise and distraction we need to enter into silence, prepared to listen to the questions that come. And it's not just questions that come to us in the silence, God comes to us too. Have you considered the possibility that God is near, that He's always been near, and He's speaking, but we're too distracted to listen?

Throughout his Gospel, John uses the metaphors of light and darkness to communicate truth concerning the world's condition. Allow me to return to what we covered in the last few weeks, beginning in vs. 4:

*“4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome [understood] it... 7 [John the Baptist] came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe... 9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.”*

But, vs. 10, not everyone recognized Jesus as God in their midst, and not every one received Him—vs 11. It’s not as though Jesus did not shine brightly enough; the failure is not His, but ours. Some were holding out for a different light, a light more to their taste and preference.

A few weeks ago, Pastor Brendan preached from John 3; vs. 19 reads, *“Light has come into the world, but [people] loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil”*.

One scholar writes, “In short, darkness is a theological description that betrays the world’s commitments and confusions... The World, then, is not a neutral place, a place of open inquiry and curiosity about God... The world is opposed to the light. Yet despite the world’s... hostile condition, still, God loves the world and has entered it in order to save”.<sup>2</sup>

If vs. 10-11 speak of the negative response to Jesus, then vs. 12-13 focus on the positive; though He was and is rejected by some, others embrace Him, and in so doing, they are reborn.

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<sup>2</sup> Burge, 63.

<sup>3</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 109.

**Vs. 12-13:** *“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”*

**illus:** perhaps you’ve heard the story of a man who was travelling down a wooded path; at one point he came upon a small, fuzzy, object lying in the middle of the path. He approached to take a closer look and found a sparrow, lying on its back, with its scrawny legs pointed to the sky. At first he thought the bird was dead, but upon further investigation, he saw that the sparrow was very much alive.

The man asked the sparrow, *“Are you alright?”* To which the sparrow replied, *“Yes.”* Then the man asked, *“What are you doing lying on your back with your legs pointed towards the sky?”* The sparrow replied, *“I heard that the sky will fall and I’m holding up my legs to catch it.”*

Confused, the man responded, *“Do you really think that you can hold up the sky with those two scrawny legs?”* The sparrow replied, in a very solemn tone, *“One must do the best they can.”*

One author writes, “Sin is the act of choosing our own way and leaving God out of the picture”.<sup>3</sup> Humanity’s problem mirrors that of the sparrow. We are cut off from God, unable to rescue ourselves, and even unable—on our own—to turn to God for rescue.

**illus:** Another story is told, this one of a conversation between an atheist and a Christian. The atheist said to the Christian, “*If there really is a God, may He prove Himself by striking me dead right now.*” He paused after speaking these words, but nothing happened. The atheist smugly announced, “*You see, there is no God.*” To which the Christian replied, “*All you’ve proved is that He is a gracious God.*”

Grace is the dazzling centerpiece of salvation. There is no room for boasting of any kind because salvation is entirely God’s work. When humanity shut the door on God and went their own way, the Father moved towards us. The Father sent the Son, and Jesus died in our place, for our sake, because of His great love. It’s this act of love, that makes a way for us to become a part of God’s family.

Grace is a difficult concept to wrap our minds around because it runs counter to our culture—all of life seems to operate on the principle of earnings and rewards.

**illus:** The harder we work, the more we expect to receive. In the world of professional sports, the faster you run, the harder you throw, the more goals, baskets, or touchdowns you score, leads to bigger contracts. Athletes are compensated according to their performance; the same is true in the business world.

I’m told that at one point in the Ford Motor Company, employees were graded on a scale of 1 to 27. One’s worked in low level admin roles, while the CEO occupied the 27th grade. When you reached grade 9, you received your own parking spot. Grade 13 got you an

office with a window. Grade 16 ensured that your office had a private bathroom.

Life as we know it is almost entirely based upon our performance. But when it comes to spiritual realities, God in His mercy, has created a system in which we get what we haven’t earned, where Jesus’ performance is what matters. We are separated from God and unable to make our way back—it is by grace we have been saved.

John writes, “*Yet to all who did receive him, to those who **believed** in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*”.

If it’s by God’s grace that we are saved, then **faith** is the means by which we are reborn and enter into God’s family. While there is an intellectual aspect to faith, faith is primarily a relational word. By faith we take God at His word; we stake our lives upon Him. We put our trust in His mercy. We trust that His love is for us, that it is greater than all of sin and failure. We look to Him to give us what we could never earn.

By faith we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection, by faith we trust that what is true of Jesus has become true of us—we have been raised from death to life, we have been adopted into God’s family. One author writes, “Faith has an *adhesive* quality to it; it binds the believer to the One who is believed.”<sup>4</sup>

“*Yet to all who did receive him, **to those who believed** in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*”.

The question is, are you among those who believe?

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<sup>4</sup> Snodgrass, 105.

Because God is responsible for creating the world, in a general sense, God can be spoken of as being the Father of all. And more, God's attitude towards people is that of a loving and benevolent Father. In one respect, God *is* the Father of all because He continues to sustain and provide. But...while God may be Father to all, in this general sense, the Bible does not speak of every person being His child.<sup>5</sup>

Vs. 12, “***to those who believed in His name***, He gave the right to become children of God”. “You must be born again,” Jesus said, “Flesh gives birth to flesh,” but in order to join God's family, you must be spiritually reborn.

Spiritual rebirth is sheer miracle, worthy of awe, wonder, and celebration. This is the invitation that Jesus holds out to you, “Come to me and be reborn; come and join God's family.”

**Conclusion:** There's a term that is used by golfers—mind you, not serious golfers who count every stroke—the term is a “mulligan”. It means a “do over”. If you shank your shot into the bush, or lake, you take a new ball, drop it right where you stand, and try again—the first ball is gone and forgotten, it no longer counts.

In one respect, this is what it means to become a Christian—you are given a “do over”—a brand new life in which Jesus works from the inside out, transforming your thoughts, desires, words, and actions. It's not easy, we are still pulled into old ways of thinking and desiring, but over time, as we follow Jesus, we are truly, and

profoundly, changed. Now, some of the choices and consequences from our past remain with us, but even then we are not alone, fending for ourselves—Jesus is with us: loving, guiding, strengthening.

Perhaps you're here today, ready for a fresh start, wanting to be spiritually reborn. If you are ready to place your faith and trust in Jesus, He is ready to receive you.

When Jesus died on the cross, He carried your pain, your disappointments, and your sin. He died and was raised to life so that you might be raised with Him. He stands even now, with open arms, inviting you to receive His forgiveness—there is nothing that He cannot forgive today. The only barrier that can keep you from God is your refusal to turn to Him.

To those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. *Do you want to be a part of God's family?*

Though our sins are as scarlet, He can wash us as white as snow. He is for us, not against us; nothing can separate us from His love. Will you turn to Him today?

**Pray**

**Worship**

**Benediction**

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<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According To John*, 87.