

Whence and Whither

John 8:14 *“I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you don’t know where I have come from or where I am going.”*

John 3:8 *“The wind blows where it wills, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it is coming from and where it is going. That’s how it is with everyone who is born of spirit.”*

The Gospel of John, one writer quipped, is “a stream where a child can wade and an elephant can swim.”¹ These waters – the life and teachings of Jesus and the true nature of his being – are deep, and the currents are fast.

Some of you know our dog, Duke. Duke is part Labrador Retriever, but he’s part something else, too. And that something else has a fear of water as great as a Lab’s love of water. When Duke was young we took him to a swimming hole near where we lived. Duke knew he wanted to get into the water, but once he got in he was afraid to go out where the water was deep. The poor guy would paddle with his front feet, but only as long as his back feet were on solid ground. So there he was, bouncing in the shallow end, yearning to go deeper, but afraid to.

Knowing God is a lot like swimming in the deep end. We may want to go there, but along with that compelling desire is a fear of what will happen if we push off from the shallow end to where our feet can no longer touch the ground.

But the evangelist, John, is not content to let us wade ankle-deep. The Jesus we meet in the fourth gospel is never safe; he draws us ever further from the safety of the shore to the limitless depths of God’s ocean.

In case your 16th century English is getting rusty, the cryptic title of today’s sermon, Whence and Whither, asks “Where does something come from and where does it go?” Particularly, John’s gospel asks these questions in reference to Jesus; What is Jesus’ origin? What is his destiny?

These questions run throughout the fourth gospel. They constitute one of the overarching themes in the Gospel of John. And these questions are not just questions the evangelist wants us to struggle with; they are questions Jesus himself wants us to struggle with. Because the evangelist John, along with the one whom he followed, knows that if we can begin to glimpse the answers to these questions about Jesus, we will find that the answers are true for us as well.

In the fourth gospel we encounter many situations where a person or a group of people misunderstands what Jesus is saying. Ironically, the misunderstanding of certain characters plays a very important role in helping the reader understand. Frequently, those who misunderstand are religious leaders, like the Scribes and the Pharisees or collaborators with the Romans. Unfortunately, the phrase which John uses to describe this group is usually translated “The Jews.” It is not possible for John to have intended this phrase to refer to the entire ethnic faith-group, for John’s community, along with

¹ Augustine of Hippo is said to have used a similar phrase to describe Scripture

Jesus himself, were Jews. John was speaking of those within his own religious and ethnic identity who opposed Jesus. It would be more accurate to speak not of “the Jews,” but “the opponents.” The opponents play a very important role; they help illuminate the truth by their absurd misunderstanding of it.

Sometimes these opponents were individuals. For example, Nicodemus. When Jesus says to Nicodemus, “*You must be born again*” Nicodemus takes this literally. “*How can I crawl back into my mother’s womb?*” As readers, we know Jesus didn’t mean that; we know there is a much deeper meaning. We can almost imagine the author of John winking at us.

Yet Jesus’ explanation to Nicodemus, “*You must be born of water and spirit,*” remains a mystery; a puzzle to ponder, much as Jesus’ parables and beatitudes in the other gospel accounts leave us questioning and struggling with the meaning Jesus intended.

One of the ways to approach the identity of Jesus is to pay attention to what Jesus’ opponents say about him. They ask, “Who is your father?”² But, of course, they already have their pre-conceived answers and accusations.

1. Jesus was accused of being just a regular person, like anyone else – Mary’s son, from Nazareth; and therefore no one special. There is irony in this accusation because when Jesus used the phrase “Son of man” he quite likely meant that he was – in the physical sense – a human being like everyone else.
2. More dangerous was the accusation by the opponents that Jesus’ parentage was unknown, which implied that Jesus was illegitimate³ and therefore unclean and cursed. Again ironic, for Jesus reveals that his inheritance and his true identity – in the spiritual sense – came from the Creator of all that is.
3. And he was accused of being a Samaritan, an untouchable; an unbeliever. This was an ethnic slur; and curiously Jesus does not deny the accusation, for he identifies with all humanity, however despised by those born in more “acceptable” circles.

Where does Jesus come from? Just has Jesus had made clear to Nicodemus that earthly origins, earthly birth do not define the human spirit, so the author of the fourth gospel makes it clear to the reader that earthly, human descriptions of Jesus’ origin are not important – whichever of them may be true. Again, Jesus’ answer to these accusations of his origin is not simple or easy, but a deep mystery. Jesus says, “*I am from Abba.*”

Now if you will forgive me for journeying into the realm of conjectural psychology for a moment, we may imagine that this question of parentage may well have held great importance for Jesus at one time. Some schoolyard bully must certainly have gleefully supplied young *Yeshua* with the information that Joseph was not his father. Evangelists Matthew and Luke support this difficult truth in their birth narratives where we learn that God’s Spirit caused Mary to become with child. This revelation of the angel Gabriel who announced the miraculous news to Mary would have held little sway with the local gossips of Nazareth, as you can imagine. In any case, it is unlikely Mary offered the miraculous pregnancy as an explanation; for Luke tells us that she kept such things to herself, pondering them in her heart.⁴

² John 8:19

³ John 8:41

⁴ Luke 2:19

Yet who would not want to know who his or her father was? How this must have tormented the boy, *Yeshua*; until he realized that his biological parenthood was incidental compared to his identity as a child of God!

How and when Jesus realized this we do not know, though John and the other gospel writers hint that it may have been at his baptism. What we *do* know is that this mystical experience changed everything for Jesus.

After a time of purification and preparation in the wilderness Jesus emerged with a focused vision: his true origin was in *Abba*; Yahweh; the Source of All Being. Whoever his biological father might be, he was a child of God; he was God's son. Yes, he was born of the flesh and of humanity, like every human being – he was a son of humanity – but his first beginnings in every sense were in God.

But this awakening that there was no separation between him and *Abba* was not the full extent of Jesus' vision. He came to realize that the true origin, the first beginnings of every human being were in God. Jesus could see that each of us – not just Jesus – is God's daughter or son. This was Jesus' mission, as we see it in all his teachings and in the example of his life: to help all people understand that our inheritance is the same as Jesus' inheritance; and to help humanity go beyond understanding, to *living in the truth* that our first beginnings as well as our final place of being are one in the same – in God who is both Birth-er and True Parent.

For a person to understand, accept and live in this truth is what the author of the fourth gospel speaks of when he says, "...to all who received him... he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of humanity but of God."⁵

Of course such talk was blasphemy. To suggest that we can not only approach God but that each and every person was created to be a perfect reflection of God, was unspeakable. To proclaim that we can experience God with no separation...⁶ ("*As you, Abba, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...*")⁷ – this was unthinkable.

Yet this was Jesus' word of truth to us, and his desire: to draw us from a place of otherness and separation from God to an *experience* of God's primal presence as part of who we truly are. "*I am from Abba,*" Jesus tells us, and calls us to experience the truth that *we* are from God. "*I and Abba are one,*" Jesus says, and calls us to experience the truth that you and I are daughters and sons of God; this is not a reward to be bestowed only on the most-favored in an afterlife, but is, rather, our true nature as those created in God own image.

Like those deep waters that our dog Duke was drawn to, and at the same time feared, what Jesus proclaims is both compelling and frightening. But Jesus reassures us that where – or *who* he came from is also where he is going, and that this is no less true for each of us.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.

⁵ John 1:12

⁶ Fr. Thomas Keating once answered the question, "How can Jesus be both fully human and fully divine?" by saying, "Between Jesus and God there is a distinction, but no separation."

⁷ John 17:21