

“Born by the Wind of God”

John 3:1-8

March 8, 2020

Second Sunday in Lent

We are creatures of habit. We like our lives ordered “just so.” We work hard to establish routines and ways of thinking that work for us, and it is unsettling—sometimes even terrifying—when something or someone comes along and asks us to change. Hear what happens when Jesus asks the Pharisee, Nicodemus, to leave his time-worn traditions behind in favor of a new way of being with God. From John’s Gospel the 3rd chapter, beginning with the 1st verse, we ask, “What is the Spirit saying to us as a church?”

There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.”

Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”

“How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”

Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

“So, don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Shhhh. Quiet, as you walk alongside me on these cobblestones, be quiet as a mouse. Be careful not to wake anyone in the house where Jesus is staying the night. They will all be watching out for his safety. I left my home under cover of dark night, not wanting to be seen by others. The other Pharisees would not understand my sneaking around. They would question my intentions, asking where I was going at this late hour. They would not approve if they knew it was Jesus I was meeting; suspicious, the other leaders would send spies out to entrap us both. We are free men, but ahhh, not so free after all.

The Romans have set a curfew against us. As a high holy man, I could probably get around their restrictions, but it would be risky. So, under cover of a moonless night, after the house torches have all been extinguished, I go to see the rabble-rouser--a blasphemer--one who makes us all nervous.

Jesus preached again today from his porch. A large crowd gathered round him, listening intently, hanging on his every prayer. I couldn't get close enough to hear him clearly. As a Pharisee I was too noticeable. But I heard him say that God was for everyone, that faithful people everywhere could be renewed in God's love and grace. He said they could all be born anew from above, this without them knowing the law of Moses, following the purity rules, paying taxes or offering sacrifices to the Temple authorities.

I wondered, "How can this be?" and I had to ask him for myself, for this teaching was heresy, and not only was it sinful, it was equally preposterous!

I have heard others proclaim that this man is divine, that he comes directly from God. He is bringing new believers into his movement by the dozens, baptizing them in what he says is the Holy Spirit. They are rejoicing and crying in the streets!

But he is breaking our law! He is defying our time-honored truths, traditions handed down to us in blood and devotion through all the generations of

our teachers: from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to David, from David to Solomon, and from Solomon to us here and now. We follow the law strictly; we strive for ritual cleanliness; we study the lessons of the prophets and the kings, heroes of our faith, and the patriarchs-- that is how we win God's favor, God's blessing. We have to earn it-- of this I am quite certain.

I do not get this "Holy Spirit;" I do not understand being born again on the Wind of God. My mind is closed to these new beliefs and revelations and I cannot open it. I won't.

This Jesus is a heretic, it is true! For his transgressions against Moses, many of my brother Pharisees and Sadducees want to see him arrested and punished. There is good cause for a warrant against him, evidence to readily convict him!

Yet, I am not so sure we need to go this far. I think he is just misguided; he suffers from delusions that he is the long-promised Messiah! But along with a sense about him that draws my sympathy there is another something compelling-- a fire in him that draws me in and makes me want to know more about him and the God he claims to intimately know. I am somewhat jealous of the intimacy he has with our God; I have never felt such emotion myself. God has always been up there somewhere: judgmental, untouchable, and unknowable.

Jesus talks about God as his Abba, his father, a loving and relational creator. This man of God's intimate nature is at once forceful and peaceful; he is compassionate and yet aggressive. Yes, he is a teacher, but he is also an instigator (!) someone who preaches peace but takes risks that put us all into jeopardy with our oppressors, the Romans.

He preaches in the light of day, but I steal away to meet him in darkness. I am drawn to what he says, but I am also not inclined to change my long-held beliefs. They have served us well, the people of God, for all these many generations. I have intently studied the laws by sunlight and by candlelight all

night. I have prayed on them and led a blameless life. I keep the purity laws and I teach others to do the same. Why now is he upsetting us so? More than ever, we need to stick to the plan! God wants it so. We don't question the laws; we don't waiver from them. We don't change for anyone, least of all an itinerant rebel.

Yet, I can't help my curiosity! I can't keep my feet firmly planted inside my own home, for he calls to me from the shadows and I must honor his invitation.

It is night but it is also in our tradition the start of a new day. When the sun sets, God's action starts anew. Maybe it is fitting that I go to him when the new day is fresh. I am filled with questions for Jesus, but I am wracked with inner turmoil. It is a poignant dilemma that verges on sacrilege...

Such is Nicodemus' challenge.

A story I read recently demonstrates the kind of awakening--the luminous epinoia-- that Jesus offers to Nicodemus. This rebirth in the Spirit, borne on the wind of God, transcends our limited notions of religious boundaries, blowing across the human experience.

The New England Holocaust Memorial welcomes visitors with six glass towers that are open to the sky. Steam escapes from the tops of each, representing the chimneys of the Nazi extermination camps during World War II. Etched into the glass are tiny six-digit numbers representing the 6 million Jews killed. Short vignettes from survivors are interspersed between the numbers, including this one from Gerda Weissman Klein:

Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present that night to me on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to your friend.

Does it take much effort to imagine the story of an existence so poor? Or can you hear it as a story of hope and abundance? It strains most of us to place ourselves in a life where there are no choices, where law is an imposition rather than a resource, where the wrong heritage or religion, the wrong step or word or the wrong look can get you arrested or killed.

But the image of a firm, red raspberry served on the outstretched unwashed hand of a best friend--that is the pictograph of spiritual rebirth that Jesus offers Nicodemus, the kind of renewal that comes gently tiptoeing into the broken spirit, borne on the wind of God. This is the kind of born-again experience that suggests to us that Ilse never means to keep the raspberry for herself and that Jesus never means to keep knowledge of the love of God for himself.

Theologian Peter Marty writes, "A generous spirit knows what it wants, and that takes away the need to deliberate or equivocate among the options." Ilse's securing a lone raspberry and delighting in the anticipation of giving it away to her fellow suffering captive is what Nicodemus can't seem to grasp in his own story. The prisoner's selfless act is not her deprivation; the risk she takes in hiding the berry and offering it to her friend is what frees her from her bondage of heart and spirit. We can sense joy and empowerment in Ilse's simple act of extravagant love, in faithfulness to the God of grace.

The Pharisee on the other hand, cannot pull the handle on his own door to freedom. He can't budge off his traditions; he can't accept the fruit offered to him by the hand and heart of God. He stands by while Jesus is arrested. He stands silent when Jesus is condemned and sentenced to death. He can only see his way clear to caring for the body of Christ after the crucifixion. He never allows himself to catch the wind from God that will radically change his life and blow him into a new and gracious way of being faithful.

He stands on his inheritance, believing as he has always been taught, says Alexander John Shaia, that "the Messiah would only come through devout

obedience to Mosaic law, that he would arrive only for the Jews, and that Jews are Jews because they are born to Jewish mothers.” He can’t fathom that a different truth might be possible, that a Messiah might come for everyone. Nicodemus misses the opportunity to go beyond his time-worn teaching and discover a new, vital and generous one. He misses the opportunity to be born again from above, by the wind that carries the love of God to the people. He misses his chance to be renewed.

Nineteen centuries hence, a Jewish girl who has nothing of her familiar understanding left finds her spirit renewed in the opportunity provided by a single fruit berry. Her act of compassion and community allows her rebirth, re-created into a new kind of God-invited inheritance. Renewal in the Spirit of God is not reserved for born-again Christians.” Marty concludes his article with this insight: “In 1 Peter, the writer speaks of an inheritance that is ‘imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.’ Ilse’s generosity is her legacy of wealth: untouched by her own death, unstained by Third Reich evil, and unimpaired by the passage of time.”

The greatest tragedy of this passage and the one that follows, John 3:16, is that these particular words have been misused by some evangelical Christians to exclude people from the heart of God and the body of Christ, the church. The intention of John’s words is exactly the opposite.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” When we see the signs in the stands of our sporting contests proclaiming John 3:16, they are not a call to Christian inclusivity; they are a misapprehension of the meaning John gives to the opportunity to be free from religious law, free to accept and savor from the outstretched hand of the Spirit sweet fruit of divine love. John is inviting old and new believers alike to be born again from above, borne on the wind of God.

Jesus never asked to be worshipped; he did not set out to create a new religion. Rather, his mission was to help people redefine their relationship with God from within the one they already knew. He only wanted to remind his own people and anyone else with ears to hear that God is waiting for us, longing to connect Creator's Spirit to creation's soul. God-Alive is singing a love song to the people, inviting us to pick up the tune and join in the love chorus.

"The words in John are intended by a loving Jesus to offer the greatest awareness and reward to an obstinate teacher who is stuck in yesterday's truth." Is this you, or are you ready to shake off the shackles of your childhood religious truth and accept the rebirth that comes with new understanding? Can you accept God's love given to you and all people unconditionally in grace? Then you have been reborn in the Spirit; you have freed yourself to hear Jesus and love Jesus in a fresh way. This is as inclusive love as it gets—no one, no one is left outside of God's light and love. Not even poor Nicodemus.

Standing out that night on the very porch where he stood preaching hours earlier of God's love for the people, Jesus offers his lone raspberry to the Pharisee, but the one who holds the power cannot appreciate the empowerment and gift being offered him, and so he turns away. The angels weep for poor-spirited Nicodemus; they gather again in centuries to come shedding their tears for the faithful, lovely Ilse.

And it was so.

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