

Born Again, *Again*

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John 3:1-8

In his book, *Leadership Jazz*, Max DePree tells about the premature birth of his granddaughter. At birth, the little one weighed only 1 pound, 7 ounces. The infant was so small, Max's wedding ring could slip over her hand and slide it all the way up to her shoulder. The doctors didn't expect this frail, fledgling life to survive. Connected to a respirator, two IVs, and a feeding tube, she was failing.

The child's biological father abandoned the family a month before the birth, so Max, the grandfather, was asked to stand in as a substitute. A wise nurse told him to visit the baby as much as possible and rub her body with the tip of his finger. While he touched the infant, he was to speak softly and lovingly. It was crucial, said the nurse, for the baby to connect the voice and the touch.

Perhaps because she did, the little one lived. She was named *Zoe*, the Greek word for *life!*

In the third chapter of the Gospel of John, we see Jesus attempting a similar intervention with Nicodemus. Spiritually-speaking, Nicodemus is on life-support. Though he is a religious leader, he is trying to live the spiritual life without much help from the Spirit. Like many of us, Nicodemus has gotten the message he should be able to do it all himself.

So Jesus banters with Nicodemus, trying to shake loose a new realization that might set him free. Like Max DePree trying to help his fledgling granddaughter connect the voice and the touch, Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus trust God enough to be “born again” or “born from above.”

Nicodemus comes to Jesus “by night,” John’s Gospel-speak for that place of darkness and despair where God is hard to find. His opening gambit is to revere Jesus as a teacher who “comes from God,” as is evident in the many signs Jesus is doing.

But Jesus brushes aside the compliment and takes Nicodemus out at the knees: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Taken aback, Nicodemus interprets Jesus literally. “How can one be born after having grown old? Can he or she enter into the mother’s womb a second time?”

Jesus again dodges Nicodemus’ parry and responds with a swift counter-thrust. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.”

Then Jesus gives Nicodemus and us one on the house. He attempts to unpack what he is talking about by likening the Spirit to the wind that blows where it will. One can’t see the “wind” or the “spirit”--same word in the Greek--but one can feel its touch and marvel at its mysterious presence and power. Even so, the Spirit cannot be contained in the neat, orderly mason jars where Nicodemus hopes to manage God’s surprises.

Sadly, Nicodemus, just stands there staring blankly. He has no experience to draw upon that makes sense of Jesus’ words. Shaking his head in bewilderment, Nicodemus says, “How can these things be?” Then he falls off the page and disappears from the dialogue. And suddenly, Jesus is talking to *us*.

Now this is where it gets tricky, especially for those of us raised in the south, because we think we know what Jesus is talking about. We live in a culture where the expression, “born again,” is often bandied about. It is even worn as a badge of honor that essentially means, “I’m a *real* Christian--a true believer--and you’re not.”

But that sort of cocksure spirituality is the very opposite of what Jesus is talking about. He's not talking about pride in our spiritual pedigree. He is talking about being surprised by a Spirit-breathed, wind-swept new beginning you are absolutely powerless to give yourself.

Presbyterian pastor and author, Frederick Buechner, has written of a time when the darkness closed in on him. He was parked by the side of the road, utterly dejected over a daughter's debilitating illness and the stress and strain it was putting on the family. Despairing over the situation, unable to go on, he looked up and saw a car passing by. Emblazoned on the car's license plate was the one word, especially from God, Buechner most needed in that instant: it was the word "trust." The word seemed to leap off the license plate and lodge within his heart.

"Was the experience something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while?" Buechner later mused. "Or was it the word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something of both. But for me it was an epiphany."

Buechner, like Nicodemus, was a religious professional: he should know better. But he, like Nicodemus, like me, and maybe like you got lost from time to time in that dark place where God is hard to find: that place of hopelessness and despair that comes from believing it's all up to us. That's when we need for the wind of the Spirit to tussle our hair and stir our souls with the good news of Jesus: that it is safe to trust God, that God knows and loves us far better than we know ourselves.

Ironically, it is when we come up empty--and turn to God in trust and longing--that the Spirit delights in breathing new life, new strength, new vitality into our faltering hearts. And that's when we're born again, *again*.

John's special word for trusting in God with that kind of force and abandon is "believe," a word he uses nearly one hundred times! To "believe" in this sense is not to nod assent to a creed, as though such theological head-tripping changed anything that really matters. No, to believe in a life-transforming, gospel way means to entrust your life to the God who draws near in Jesus. And when you trust God like that, when you live like that, the Holy Spirit draws near, giddy with joy, at the prospect of breathing new life into you. Soon, the very breath of God is coursing through your veins.

And so in our baptism, we confess Jesus as Lord: the one who brings God near, the one we follow; and as Savior, the one who forgives us when we fail. Then we're plunged beneath the waters, as though we are indeed, entering the womb a second time. Only this time, it is the womb of God, where we receive the breath of eternal life.

And when we punch back up through the waters, our face glistening wet with the waters of rebirth, we are set free to live as the sons and daughters of God we always were but forgot how to be. Is it any wonder that Titus--while savoring the miracle of new birth--breaks forth in song, "(God) saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to (God's) mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This spirit God poured out richly on us through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5-6). Or as we shall presently sing in a modern version of that ancient baptismal hymn, "Wash O God, Your Sons and Daughters."

A little boy of four couldn't wait for his baby sister to come home from the hospital. He wanted to be near her, to talk with her, to have time alone with her. Of course, his parents weren't about to leave their newborn alone with a four-year-old, but he was so insistent. Finally, they relented.

The parents watched discreetly from the door as the little boy tip-toed to his sister's crib. He leaned over and whispered: "Tell me about God. I'm beginning to forget."

Yes, we're prone to forget. So Jesus left this bread and cup to help us remember: "That God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever trusted in him might not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Sitting dejected by the side of the road, or at the kitchen table, or even kneeling at this rail, head in hands, we feel so alone, so overwhelmed, so responsible. But the bread and wine reminds us we don't have to go on like this. For Jesus yet sidles up beside us on the wings of the Spirit and whispers, "You must be born again, *again*."

And if we're willing to meet him at the Table, as we once met him in the waters of the womb of God, we can yet again hear and heed the gospel's call: "He came unto his own and his own received him not."

“But to all who *received* him--who *believed in his name*--he gave power to become sons and daughters of God” (John 1:12-13).

O holy Christ, slip past our resistance and break through our unbelief that we might experience anew the fullness of your love. In the power of your Spirit, breathe new life into our faltering hearts. Awaken us to our true destiny as the sons and daughters of God. Amen.

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