

20.03.08: Lent 2 - WIND as symbol of Lenten Journey

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'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.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Sermon:

Can you feel the darkness of the night? So dark that before your eyes adjust you can't even see your hand when you hold it in front of your face? It was a darkness like that when Nicodemus crept out of the house. He didn't tell his wife where he was going, he just silently pulled the door shut behind him. It wasn't a far walk to where Jesus was staying, no need to light a lamp. The road was still, no one else out in the inky darkness. There was a flame flickering in the house ahead, Jesus must still be awake. Just before committing, just before Nicodemus knocked and entered, his heart pounding like a wild animal trying to escape - he reconsidered. "What am I, a Pharisee, a leader of the people, doing here? I'm respected by my peers, live a frugal life, based on God's word - always looking to the Law of the Prophets to guide my steps"... Yet it was the burning in his gut that brought him here, to the door, at this late hour, under the cover of night. And so he knocked and was welcomed in. Right off the bat the conversation took a strange turn; Jesus declaring that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, being born anew.

What are you saying, Jesus?

No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and wind. What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

Nic shook his head, "how can it be?" he asks - trying to make sense of these words of Jesus, trying to understand this call to new life, when a gust of wind happened to whistle down the chimney, making the dying embers burst into flame, and Jesus said being born again was like that. It wasn't something you did. The wind did it. The Spirit did it. It was something that happened to you. That's what being born anew is all about.¹

¹ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/5/18/nicodemus>

We don't hear anymore from Nicodemus that night. He's left with that question lingering in the air - how can this be? Jesus telling him it's the wind; the Spirit, this being born anew *happens to you*.

Then, Nicodemus is gone from our gospel story here in this story, but he shows up again later in John's gospel (7:45-52, 19:38-42), defending Jesus before the Pharisees and then helping Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.

What happened to Nicodemus that night, as he left with the imperative - you must be born anew? Was the process of birthing happening in him?

Out of all the possible metaphors Jesus might have chosen to describe "seeing" or "entering" the Kingdom of God, he picks this one - being born. The experience of the Kingdom is like being born: it's a radical, traumatic, life-changing event.

Nicodemus understands Jesus to be saying he must be born *again*, and he wants to know how. "A man can't enter into his mother's womb and be born a second time, can he?" To which the answer is and always will be, "Of course not: that's a physical impossibility." But perhaps that is the precise point of Jesus' statement. Because what Nicodemus is doing by maintaining the rigorous demands of his life as a Pharisee is like trying to give birth to himself—trying to give birth to himself, his spiritual self— and that's impossible.

Think back for just a moment to the circumstances of your own birth. Who was it that labored to get you here? You, or your mother? None of us birthed ourselves. Our mothers *gave* birth to us. Did you hear that? They *gave us* our birth. Which means that our role in the whole birthing process was a pretty passive one. Our job, as babies being born, was to let go and let our mothers labor on our behalf.

Jesus seems to be saying, "Nicodemus, for too long now you've been trying to deliver yourself by your own efforts. I say to you that you must be born again—you must let go and trust God with this holy labor."

Don't you think that in every generation we tend to act like the Pharisees? We like structure more than spontaneity. We are more comfortable with law than with spirit.

Like Nicodemus some of us are trying to work our way into the Kingdom, to earn our place in God's kingdom. But that's not how it works.

In thinking about this metaphor of birthing, I wondered, what's the role of the baby in the birthing process? Does the one being born have any role to play, or does birth happen to it? Ah, the miracle of Google...I learned that in a normal, full-term birth, it's the baby that gets the birthing process started. The release of proteins from the baby's lungs, essential for normal breathing outside the womb, initiates the labor process.²

So the one being born *is* an active participant in being birthed. Birth happens when the one being born is ready to breathe on its own - to receive the Wind, the Spirit of life, outside the confines of the womb.

When we're ready to breathe, we're ready to be born.

Are you ready to be born anew? Are you ready to say 'yes' to the birthing process, to trust this midwife of the Spirit to deliver you into the Kingdom, here and now?

This born anew, born again language is layered with many meanings in our culture. I suggest this is not about asking - have you been born again, once and done, said a prayer and you're set for life. That's not Jesus' way. Jesus invites us to re-enter relationship anew; to come back to a reliance on God's love again and again, breath by breath.

Being born anew happens for me when I'm riding my bike home and as I replay a conversation, I recognize a place where I was not loving, where maybe I was fearful and responded not from a place of God's spaciousness, but instead, cramped anxiety. When I recognize that sin - that missing the mark of living in God's love, I ask for forgiveness, I ask to be saved from my small-hearted ways of being, I ask to be made new. I take a deep breath and I start again. Is that what being born anew might look like?

² [Molecular mechanisms within fetal lungs initiate labor](#)

Being born anew is noticing places of discomfort and choosing to step into those places. Maybe it's as simple as following up with someone who has sent an email that makes you bristle with anger or resentment. If you take a deep breath and choose to step into relationship with love, with God's love, might that be what being born anew looks like?

Yesterday at Hyattsville, I sat and had lunch with a bunch of folks from West Philly Mennonite Fellowship, as part of the Allegheny Mennonite Conference spring assembly. We officially welcomed that congregation into our conference yesterday. They were leaving a conference where they weren't safe to live out their call to welcome and affirm all people; to bless all who want to live in committed relationships of marriage and inclusion in the church. This was a long, long birthing process for them. A painful and also liberating journey of being born anew. Those from West Philly were taking another deep breath, one of many deep breaths where they said 'Yes' to the Spirit, the movement of God, and so were born anew into a conference we now share together.

Birth is messy, it's fraught with danger, *and* it brings new life. Birthing happens when we're ready to breathe and when we're ready to let God work in us and through us.

Being born again means giving up control and letting God bring new life. Our task is simply the willingness to enter God's life, to say yes to being a child of God once again.

We need to be willing, ready to breathe, but then God does the birthing, not us. We start again as children of God. Our task here is to say 'yes'. Maybe it's noticing places we've missed the mark, where we ask God's forgiveness and turn our eyes and hearts to God, take a deep breath, and trust that God can make something new.

Maybe it's reaching out in a place of discomfort and working on building a relationship of love, not fear with another.

So, what about you? Are you ready to breathe? Ready to breathe and then allow God to bring new life?

Jesus says, "The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit, the Breath of God."

When we're ready to breathe, we're ready to be born.

Are you ready to breathe in the Spirit, the wind, the breath of God?