

Abraham, Nicodemus & Us

Genesis 12:1-4 John 3:1-17

Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church

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"Unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, a wise teacher among the Pharisees who had sought out the young prophet in the night.

Nicodemus was perplexed by Jesus' words. Why was Jesus speaking to him about birth? Nicodemus' life had had been a journey in search of wisdom and righteousness. He had begun long ago, and his search had brought him on this night to interview Jesus. But Jesus was talking to him as if he had to start all over again.

Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The word "Spirit" in Greek is *pneuma*, which also means "breath" or "wind." Jesus went on to say, "The *pneuma* (that is the wind, the "breath," the "spirit") blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone that is born of the Spirit" - (the *pneuma*).

Nicodemus was on a journey of faith, seeking wisdom and righteousness. Jesus said to him, "Nicodemus - the answers you are looking for will not be found in a text book. The knowledge will not come from taking notes on my lectures. What your journey is about is opening yourself up to the spirit of God."

I was born on September 18, 1949 in Inglewood, California.

I was born again the summer of 1964, when the grace of God became real to me, embodied in the close friendships of peers and adults at my church. God's Spirit witnessed to my spirit the assurance of love, and called me to servanthood.

I was born again while sitting on a stool behind the tympani while the high school honor band played a transcription of Bach's Little Organ Fugue in g minor. I didn't have a note to play in the arrangement, but the simplicity and intricacy of the different parts of that fugue bouncing between the brass and the woodwinds opened up a world of beauty that touched the souls of us 16 and 17 year-olds in the room, though we were too embarrassed to speak of it.

I was born again in 1972 during six weeks of travel in Latin America, and my eyes were opened to the unjust human systems by which the powerful maintain privilege and the poor are oppressed.

I was born again on August 25th, 1973, when I spoke vows of love and faithfulness to Kay, and entered that state of being called "the married life."

I experienced rebirth on the two occasions when I was privileged to be present with Kay and to witness the birth of our children. The miracle of God's gift of life was revealed all over again.

I was born again each time people of another culture welcomed me as their pastor – Samoan, Filipino, African, Chinese & Korean. I was broadened, and forced to rethink my definition of words like unity, diversity, and American.

There have been many times when rebirth came out of painful experiences. Those were times when I saw God wanted me to change - because I had not been fair to other people, because my anger had been hurtful, or my neglect had been painful. I was brought up short, forced to look inside and see changes that need to be made. I am still working on them.

I have experienced rebirth several times when I have been present as someone lay dying, holding their hand and the hands of family, praying, aware of the depth and the mystery of God's love – aware of God's presence in moments of awe and silence.

My friends, God willing, I am born again every day when I open myself fully to the life God sends me. Rebirth happens when the breath of God touches us to love us, forgive us, assure us, claim us, challenge us and redirect us!

Sometimes we speak of rebirth and other times being born again, but I think it is more accurate to use the phrase we find in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible – born from above. Each of these experiences is an experience of the Spirit of God renewing life. Birth experiences come unbeckoned, and take us in a direction unexpected. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus was inviting Nicodemus to a life of continual renewal and rebirth.

Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century mystic, said: "Listen, there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along." Then Hildegard spoke of herself, "Thus I am...a feather on the breath of God."

There is a rich image for us - for all of us who are trying to so carefully plot our course, to design our future, to methodically seek after the proper way of life - "Thus I am ... a feather on the breath of God." "The wind blows where it wills."

Once upon a time, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First she read everything she could get her hands on - history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lively, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer.

Finally she put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. She went to India. Everywhere she went, people told her they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, only they were not sure where he lived. She asked about him in every country on earth until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house - a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line.

She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

"Yes?" said the kind looking old man who opened it. She thought she would die of happiness.

"I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question," she said, gasping for breath. "What is the meaning of life?"

"Please come in and have some tea," the old man said.

"No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old man said, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since his visitor did not leave any room for him to reply), and as she talked he placed a small teacup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea.

She was so busy talking that she did not notice when the tea cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall.

"What are you doing?!" She yelled when the tea burned her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk."

We are on a journey of faith. Our call is to open ourselves to the Spirit, to allow ourselves to journey like a feather on the breath of God. That works better when we travel light. Being open to God's way means being flexible about our own agenda.

In the 12th chapter of Genesis we read, "Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

Abram, later to be known as Abraham, seems to have had every reason to ignore God's call, both at the beginning and all along the way. First of all, why should he leave what we can assume to be secure surroundings and the company of his kindred to set out into the unknown?

God promised Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

Now just how is that going to come about? Where is the blueprint that shows us the plan? What are the goals and objectives of our action strategy? And what does all this have to do with leaving my home and becoming a wandering nomad?!?

I expect that Abraham had a lot of questions, but God had indicated to Abraham his plan for history; and Abraham believed it to be something real, and he responded by stepping forth on a journey into the unknown.

Abraham was given a vision (look at the stars in the sky) and a mission (through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed!), but he had no map. Our church has a vision and a mission, and we have a map. But we must be careful that we don't miss some important intersection because we have our head buried in the map instead of watching where we are going. Our strategic map is well and good, but it is not the source of vital ministry. Our life plan is worthwhile, but it is not the real stuff of our lives. Follow the map, work the plan, but keep your head up to be attentive to the Spirit wind blowing through.

Rebirth happens every time someone experiences a blessing – it is the Spirit, the breath of God, the winds of change acting on that ancient promise to Abraham, that all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Rebirth happens when we connect with one another holding empty cups, with no agenda other than to listen and care.

Rebirth happens, but we don't know just when or where or how it is going to happen next.

We are on a journey. We don't control the wind. We cannot control the changes in our lives, our changing community, our changing world. Yet in the changes there is the Spirit of God blowing through, and the opportunity to be open to a new wind blowing. What might it mean for the breath of God to blow through our lives, our church, our community – and bear us along in such a way that we become a blessing to the larger community and to the world?

Let us then be borne along on our journey, as feathers on the breath of God. Amen.