

Born from Above

[Genesis 12:1-4a](#)

[Romans 4:1-5, 13-17](#)

[John 3:1-17](#)

When I was in my middle teens I was very certain about many things. I knew, for example, exactly how one was born again and I tried to help other people receive Jesus by saying the simple words, “I accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior.” I didn’t realize that some people might just say that in order to amuse themselves, or in order to get rid of me, but not actually mean it. Now I’m not nearly so sure that “accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior” is the same as being “born from above.” Today’s Gospel reading is the big born-again passage but Jesus gives us very little information about how it happens.

Last night I watched an episode of “Call the Midwife” and got to see lots of babies being born of the flesh. It helped me think about the whole process of being born. Birth is a radical discontinuity which often happens slowly and with pain. We pass from one state to another. With birth we move from the presumably mainly pleasant and limited environment of the womb into the sometimes pleasant but very variable environment of the world. Rather like the story of Adam and Eve finding themselves outside the garden and starting to experience the wider world where it takes more effort to grow food and to have children.

So perhaps being born from above is moving from a limited environment to one which is much more expansive but not necessarily easier. Moving from the known to the unknown. In the years that have passed since I was a teenager I have become much less certain of many things and much less certain of how to understand the things of God and the life of the Spirit. Jesus said, “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.” Being second born means living with uncertainty because we never know when or how God will reveal herself and when or how he will move us to something unexpected. Just like Abram in our first reading when God says “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you... So Abram went.”

Abram was second born even though in time he came long before Jesus, because he trusted God enough to go and to live his life in close relationship with God. That’s what Paul is talking about in that rather complex second reading. Even though the Christ had not yet incarnated, died and resurrected, God’s grace made Abraham twice-born. And that’s what it’s all about – God’s grace which makes us new.

We don’t know why Nicodemus went to Jesus by night. Perhaps he didn’t want to be seen. Perhaps he had a day job. Perhaps the writer is riffing on the idea that he introduced at the

very beginning of this gospel – that the “light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.” (Jn 1:4) Perhaps the writer is suggesting that Nicodemus and the powerful Pharisees he represents are in the dark about Jesus.

They see what he is doing and so they know that the presence of God is with him, but that’s as far as it goes. So Jesus says, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Again this takes us back to the gospel’s prologue, “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” (Jn 1:11-13). Ah, that’s where receiving or accepting Jesus comes in. “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” The gift of God is that we may be in such a close intimate relationship with her as a little baby with its mother.

Without emojis we can’t be sure – is Nicodemus shocked or bemused or even scornful? “How can anyone be born having grown old?” he asks, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” To which, of course, the answer is NO, one cannot. But Jesus isn’t talking material, literal “call the midwife” birth. Jesus is talking spiritual birth, and spiritual truth is always difficult to express. ‘You must be born from above...’ “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

I have asked several of you this week what it means to be born again and each of you has given me a different rather vague answer. It seems like we recognize it in ourselves and sometimes in others but spiritual rebirth is difficult to define. I am reminded of a different conversation, this time in Matthew’s gospel “Jesus invited a little child to stand among them. ‘Truly I tell you,’ he said, ‘Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’” (Matt 18:3). Children are constantly learning. Children don’t need to un-learn prejudices and judgments because they are just now learning them. Becoming like a little child is like being born again.

When it comes to this stuff we have as little intellectual understanding as small children. But we know it’s true. When we turn to God, God turns to us. It’s a whole new day, a whole new life. Again and again and again. For me it hasn’t been a quick birth. Being born of the Spirit has been a lifetime of labor. I know that’s true for some of you, whereas others have been born quickly and almost effortlessly. And I know that some of you don’t feel fully born yet. It’s ok to have beginner’s mind. It’s ok to be unsure, to not know. What is important is that we keep coming to God in the night of our minds. We keep opening our hearts and our hands to receive whatever new birth is, whatever the Spirit has for us.

And we do that because we know without doubt that God loves us, totally and completely.

Some of us struggle with the famous verse, John 3:16, “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.” For some of us, it seems exclusionary as though it’s saying that everyone who does not believe in Jesus is damned. But that’s taking it out of the context of the next verse, “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.”

That the world might be saved through him, or that the world – the cosmos- might be made whole by him. Are we not all part of the cosmos? Will the cosmos be made whole and somehow those poor humans who never heard of Jesus be left out of that amazing redemption?

I don’t think so.

It seems as though God’s love for us and God’s decision to give us free will make us humans a keystone species when it comes to the redemption of the world. And in order to get on board with God’s big idea we get to be born again – we get to start again learning about a whole new world which makes our past learning irrelevant. Life outside the womb is very different. Life outside the Garden is very different. Life for Abram in the new country is very different. Life in the spirit is very different.

We are called to be children of God; reborn and seeing with God’s eyes. As we are born from above so we can see the kin-dom of God. That is our heritage, that is our joy. Let us live every day born of the spirit, aware of the kin-dom.