

Genesis 12: 1-4
Galatians 3: 6-9
John 3: 1-17

Birthplace
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Mary R. Brownlow

Abram, the traditions say, was born in the city of Ur, in Mesopotamia. He traveled with his father and other relatives to Haran, in present day Turkey, following the water, following the curve of what we now call the Fertile Crescent. This makes sense, if you are a nomad with herds of animals to feed. Our story from Genesis today suggests that something new happened when Abram was seventy-five years old: he had a conversation with God. And then he got on the road again, traveling even farther from his birthplace. Today we got the first episode in the unfolding of the long, close and complicated relationship of Abram (later Abraham) with the voice of the invisible, unknowable Spirit of God.

Nicodemus, the traditions say, was a Pharisee, a scholar and a leader. His name is Greek, and means “victory of the people,” so we assume that he was a cosmopolitan Jew who had already made some accommodation with his local overlords and their culture. He was born into a certain role in life: a position of wealth and power. Our story from the Gospel of John today suggests that something new broke into his world: he had a conversation with Jesus. It set him on a certain path, eventually taking him far from his roots. Later on we hear that he advocated for Jesus in a meeting of Jewish leaders, saying “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing.” And later still, he tends to the lifeless body of Jesus as it is removed from the cross. Today we got the first episode in the unfolding of the complicated relationship of Nicodemus with the invisible, unknowable Spirit of God.

Each of these men had set out on a journey from what they knew, what was familiar, from the birthplace of their identity, into something radically different. At times, I am sure it felt like a blessing. At times, I am pretty sure that it was confusing or distressing. But set out they did, reborn, as it were, into new kind of life.

We are used to hearing stories from the Hebrew Scriptures of God speaking to people when they are in crisis: when Moses is called to a heroic mission of liberation, or when Deborah is called to help lead an army against the Philistines, or when Esther feels the call to rescue her people from genocide. But Abram is just minding his own business as a nomad - no apparent crisis – and God calls him anyway. Is it possible that the Spirit moves even in the lives of those who seem complacent? We are used to hearing stories of people coming to Jesus in need: hungry or sick or in need of reconciliation, clearly vulnerable and needy and open to whatever he offers. Nicodemus, though, is one who lives at the center of prestige and power. What kind of need could he possibly have? Is it possible that the Spirit moves even in the lives of those who seem to have it all? Is it possible that the Spirit is blowing around all the time, looking for opportunities for pushing people into conversion and transformation, and that these two people just happened to be able to feel that breeze?

Nicodemus seems mostly curious, at first. Jesus, an outsider from Galilee, has arrived in the capital city and made something of a commotion in the Temple, chasing out the moneychangers and

the livestock. Some people found his demonstrations of power, which are called “signs” in the Gospel of John, compelling and began to trust him as an authentic prophet. So it is natural that a leader of the Jewish elite would be both curious and a little shy of being seen openly visiting this...firebrand. His first words are conciliatory and respectful: “Rabbi, we know that you a teacher that comes from God...” Then Jesus takes some initiative. No respectful niceties, just the bold statement that seeing the kingdom of God requires a whole new birth. We’re jumping in at the deep end here, as the rest of the conversation is controlled with Jesus’ agenda. Nicodemus tries to slow it down with a perfectly rational reply about the impossibility of old men getting a literal new birth, but Jesus will have none of it. “I know and you know,” he seems to say, “that we are talking about the world of the Spirit, that it breaking in even now in a breathtaking display of God’s love and mercy.”

Jesus has taken over the conversation – starting with the fact that the signs point to the imminent kingdom of God. He makes this a personal issue. A person has to undergo a transformation to even perceive this kingdom, this world of the Spirit. Jesus calls this transformation being born from above or being born anew. There is a trickiness of language: in the original Greek, he could be saying born anew or born from above. He could be speaking about time – “again”- or space – “from above.” Not being happy with ambiguity, Nicodemus latches on to the most literal meaning. Is Jesus doing even more miraculous things and having old men go through a physical birth process again? Jesus clarifies the birth image: it’s about water, like the waters of baptism, and it’s about the breath and Spirit of God.

One gets the feeling that Jesus is enjoying the word play here, almost teasing Nicodemus with his responses. There is more ambiguity: the same word can mean either “Spirit” or “wind” or “breath”. So he shifts from talking about spiritual birth to talking about the wind. Or is he? As mysterious as the movement of the wind is the movement of God’s breath in the world, spinning us around, inspiring us, giving us life. In seeking Jesus out, Nicodemus was getting more than he bargained for. Jesus is offering a chance for transformation, a chance to be blown by that wind, a chance for new life, a kind of rebirth. But, rooted in his literal, material world, all Nicodemus can say is “How can these things be?”

Let’s go back to the beginning, to what we know. To be born is to be absolutely dependent and vulnerable, to start learning life and language from scratch. To be born is to start with unknowing, and to begin searching for a story to live by. Nicodemus is already rooted in his birthplace; he already has a story to live by. How can he give this up and start it all over? No wonder it seems impossible to him. To a person used to power, that kind of vulnerability seems like a death sentence.

Brené Brown is a woman who researches human behavior. She says, “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

Our Gospel reading today is full of controversial words – even hot-button words – that are often spoken in a kind of code. At times, they become a kind of armor, protecting us from – or preventing – the kind of vulnerability we desperately need. “Kingdom of God,” “Born of the Spirit,” “believe,” and “eternal life.” These are the source of complicated theologies and controversies. What exactly is the Kingdom of God,” and is it ever going to show up on earth?

What is this rebirth, or being born again or born from above all about? What is “belief,” and in what do we place this belief? And “eternal life” – is that going to heaven or some other sort of out-of-the-body experience? And so we wrestle with vocabularies, seeking a common understanding....even though we are not always nice about it. As the preacher Kathryn Matthews said, “Isn't it just a little bit ironic that a text in which Jesus tries to get a religiously righteous person not to take things literally is often interpreted so rigidly?”

So I propose a little reframing, allowing a little more play into the words. Reframing the phrase “Kingdom of God” with the help of Dominic Crossan to mean “the Great Divine Clean-Up of Earth, was not just imminent but already here... a process in time, an event with a beginning, a continuation, and an end.” Reframing the idea of being “born from above” or “born again” to a picture of spiritual growth that emphasizes relationship and experience more than birthplaces, status, dogma, or doctrine. Reframing belief to a deep trust in the unfolding purposes of God. Reframing “eternal life” to mean not the endless duration of human existence, but a picture of life lived in the unending presence of God. And finally, understanding the famous verse (famous at least at football games), John 3:16 to mean that God actually loves this world and each creature in it, no matter where his or her birthplace, and that behind that windy spirit, pushing us around, is the intense power of love.

And so we might avoid temptations. One is the temptation to use the expression “spiritual” as an escape from “religion” or “faith”. It goes without saying that we are all spiritual beings, infused with the breath of God and the need to ponder life’s mysteries. But the tug of the Spirit will always be towards finding right relationships with each other and all creation. Compassion and justice cannot have meaning in isolation. We need to find connection to our ancestors, our children, and our neighbors. The Spirit will always blow us into community. And there we may find that a claim to spirituality holds us to a greater, not a lesser, accountability.

Another temptation would be the easy acceptance of a concept like being “born again”. For all its use in modern America, it seems that this is the only time that Jesus used the phrase, and, as we have seen, it could have a different translation: “born from above.” Jesus didn’t use it again: not with the woman at the well, or with sinners, or the blind man, or the rich young ruler. He did talk about the need for ongoing change, the kingdom of God, and the challenge of living in that kingdom. Rather than a single moment in the life of a believer, Jesus talks about an ongoing encounter with a mysterious wind. It’s not a formula. It’s one image among many.

Let’s work instead with the image of the wind of the Spirit blowing through our hearts, our families, our church, we might imagine what would be blown out and what would be blown in. Habits and prejudices that we’ve had for years might fly out the windows. Sorrows and apathy might waft slowly out the door, while through another coming a breeze smelling like hope and purpose. Maybe some people we don’t recognize would find themselves blown through the door of the sanctuary, and we would feel drawn in their direction, seeking a connection with the unseen order in their company.

Whether we identify with that nomadic immigrant, Abram, or with that settled man of privilege, Nicodemus, the Gospel today is good news. As each of their stories unfolds, we sense that Spirit blowing them from their birthplaces to a new homeland. We sense learning, conversion, new life, the challenges of following a God as mysterious as wind and as close as a mother’s womb. Abram lives his entire life on pathways through the desert, his legacy a tribe of restless and questing

people. Nicodemus lives the rest of his life in that liminal place between respectability and compassion, his legacy a compassionate gesture towards a dead Messiah. Whether you are still on the road, whether you are searching for your tribe, whether you are searching for your Rabbi, or ready to sign yourself up for “the Great Divine Clean-Up of Earth,” you are in good company. Wherever you come from, however you name your birthplace, you are welcome in this company of vulnerable, hopeful people, headed toward the homeland of heaven.

I close with this poem from Rainer Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*, I 2

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
but I give myself to it.
I circle around God, around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years
and I still don't know: am I a falcon,
a storm, or a great song?

Amen.