

March 5, 2023
“Umbilical Faith”
Psalm 121 / John 3:1-17
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

On my most recent birthday, officially my 51st, my mom shared some details of my birth story. Some of which I knew, some of which I didn't – or at least didn't remember. Allow me to share a few highlights:

- for context, it was early, early morning on January 16, 1972, at Marysville Memorial Hospital, in Marysville, Ohio
- it was the coldest day of the year, minus 16 – my mom reports that the big clock in our small town froze; she also reports that my dad left the car running overnight afraid that it wouldn't start when the time came, and ALMOST ran out of gas
- it was Super Bowl Sunday, and the doctor who delivered me, not my Mom's regular doctor because he was out of town, was annoyed – maybe in gest, maybe not – to be bothered on Super Bowl Sunday of all days
- when that doctor, Dr. Hurl, who was heavy set, went out to tell my dad that I'd been born, and that I was a boy, my dad – apparently 100 pounds lighter – picked him up and twirled him around, he was so excited
- and finally, it turns out that Amy's best friend from college, who was adopted, was born in the same hospital, a year later – small world!

Birth stories are important. They run deep, even if complicated and layered.

My birth, like all of ours of course, was an event. The single occurrence of an extraordinary process, a complicated series of preceding events, at the end of which I arrived – like we all do – brand new to a brand new world.

As far as any of us know, at least biologically speaking, we are born just the one time.

Reincarnation asserts that the soul or spirit, after biological death, takes on new life but in a different form – depending on the moral standing of the life just lived.

And what Jesus asserts in this exchange with Nicodemus is a rebirth of a different order, though it takes Nicodemus – a Pharisee, a teacher of Jewish law – a bit to catch up, if he catches up at all. Biblical literalists, take note.

Nicodemus does not come to Jesus in the usual way. Religious leaders of the day are largely portrayed in the gospels as approaching Jesus armed with leading questions, questions meant not to deepen understanding but to test and challenge Jesus and the authority with which he speaks. To put him on the spot. And to do so as publicly as possible, in broad daylight.

This is exactly the opposite of what Nicodemus does. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. No public spaces. No crowds. No one but him and Jesus. He's not looking to draw attention to Jesus or to himself – and it's perhaps worth noting here, in context, that as the narrative flows in John's gospel, Jesus has just before this turned over the money changers' tables in the temple. One could understand his hesitation.

But even in the cover of night, Nicodemus does not come with a question. Only a compliment, perhaps to butter Jesus up: "Rabbi (itself a title of respect, of course), 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."

Maybe that's his entrée into a leading question, but we never find out. Instead, Jesus provokes as any good teacher does. He stirs the pot with talk about needing to be "born from above" – that is, born of God – in order to see the realm of God. Born again, if you will.

There's no such thing as a dumb question, right? I do believe that, at least as long as the question is offered in a genuine search for deeper understanding. As a student, I always appreciated when my teachers or professors reiterated that point, though it didn't actually make much difference for me, having spent far too much of my educational experience afraid to ask questions for fear of asking a dumb question. A shame as I look back.

We can appreciate Nicodemus' genuine desire to deepen his understanding of what Jesus is suggesting, but his question – if not dumb – completely misses the point. And herein lies the warning to biblical literalists.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb to be born?”

Because it's a metaphor, Nicodemus. It's a metaphor!

The exchange reminds me of the first day of my Hebrew Scriptures class in seminary. Old Testament.

We were asked beforehand to read Jonathan Swift's classic essay, known as “The Modest Proposal” – in which, as you may know, Swift anonymously and satirically proposed that the poor (Irish, in this case) could solve their economic hardship by selling their children as food for the rich.

Now if memory serves, I would say that at least half of my class was disgusted, even outraged, by the essay. But like Nicodemus, they completely missed the point. They failed to see the satire, the hyperbole, that served to mock the prevailing heartlessness of both attitudes and policies directed at those living in poverty in early 18th-century Ireland.

It was a revealing exercise for our class, and one that our professor, Dana Fewell, expertly used to get folks thinking about the Bible as a complicated and nuanced narrative, a great work of literature, and not the literal word of God.

Some of my classmates struggled, and many in the church still do. As Nicodemus did.

“How can these things be?”

Because THESE THINGS are metaphor. Their meaning runs deeper. I'm not talking about earthly things, Jesus says to Nicodemus, but heavenly things. You're a teacher of the law, for God's sake, but God help you if you can't get that. Except that God CAN'T help you if you can't get that.

You can't see, Jesus says, much less enter, the realm of God, the kin-dom of God, without being born from above. Without being born from God. Without being born again. Without being born of water and Spirit.

"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."

Here wind is the Greek word *pneuma*, meaning wind OR spirit – and it echoes the Hebrew word, *ruach*, and the divine wind present at Creation, as narrated in the first two chapters of Genesis. And that, to be clear, is not a literal creation story.

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God – *ruach Elohim* – swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness (God) called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day."

Wind and spirit. Water and darkness and light. The very elements of Creation. Of life itself. "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the spirit is spirit," Jesus says.

To see, to enter, to experience the realm of God, the kingdom of heaven, you must be born from God. You must open yourself again and again and again and again to that of God inside you, around you. You must connect and reconnect to, and ground yourself in, the very Source of life and love.

"We are born of love;" Rumi writes, "Love is our mother."

"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;" Sylvia Path writes, "I lift my eyes and all is born again."

With each breath, in fact, we and the world are born again and again and again and again. It's not a birth event, it's a birthing rhythm – a perpetual rhythm, like a snake shedding its skin.

You may have your own understanding of what it means to be born again. The late theologian and Jesus scholar Marcus Borg offered some possibilities, many of which are rooted generally in the biblical witness, and specifically in Jesus' life and teaching:

- reconnecting with God
- returning home from exile
- seeing again or seeing differently, with new eyes
- receiving the gifts of the Spirit
- centering your life in God
- living into a new way of being
- dying to your old self, or losing your life in order to gain it
- letting go of whatever keeps you from God, and from who and whose you are as God's beloved

Nicodemus asks, literally, how this can be, but his is an earthly question with a heavenly answer.

“How can these things be?” There is no HOW!

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes poetically suggests in conversation with this text, there is only ALLOW:

*I'm sorry. There is no how.
There is no jump, leap, crawl,
climb, push or swim.
There is only allow.*

*Being born again
isn't something you can do.
It's something your mother does
for you.*

*Breathing in and out
you descend into that dark tomb
that only when you enter
is a womb.*

*Much you can't save,
you must shed to fit,*

*surrender to become
a fracturing seed
like broken bread.
What you leave behind in the grave.*

*Dying is your only choice,
surrendering your only how.
The rest is gift and mystery,
and God's work, not yours.
There is only allow.*

The process, the rhythm, NOT a singular event, of being born again is one rooted in faith. Not intellectual belief in certain things but holistic belief in the divine possibility and promise of newness, of new life, ALWAYS.

Let's call it UMBILICAL FAITH. Again, staying connected to and grounded in the very Source of life and love.

The text from John goes on, as we heard, to the famous – well, infamous – John 3:16. You know the one. Even if you don't know the Bible you probably know this verse. The one held up on poster boards at sporting and other prominent events around the world.

“For God so loved the world that (God) gave (God's) only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” And continuing with verse 17: “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.”

Christians have long missed the point – using these verses to draw an unnecessary and ridiculous line in the sand between themselves and those who don't believe as they do.

But it's not about the necessity to believe, it's about God's love. This is, like much of John's gospel, a statement of faith rather than a statement of universal truth. Whoever believes in and follows Jesus as their particular path to knowing and understanding God, the Divine, MAY have eternal life, but that doesn't mean that whoever DOESN'T believe in and follow Jesus does not ALSO have a path to knowing and understanding God, or MAY NOT have eternal life. To suggest otherwise is not only mean, it's completely contrary to who God is as the God of Love.

And a quick word here about eternal – as in, eternal life.

We humans are fascinated with the notion of immortality, but that's not a thing. And that's not what we're talking about here. It's not about believing so that you get keys to the kingdom, to some LITERAL place called heaven, when you die.

It IS about (and again, this takes us back to Jesus and the invitation to be born again); it IS about living so that you are open and continually reopened to – and reconnected to – the divine light and love within and around you, RIGHT NOW. RIGHT HERE, the realm or kingdom of God, of love, on earth as it is in heaven.

It IS about living that allows for, that trusts in, ALWAYS, the divine possibility of new life, RECREATION, rebirth, for ourselves, with every single breath. With each new day. And with it, the possibility of new life, RECREATION, rebirth, for each other and for the world and for the earth itself.

In this way, as Garnaas Holmes also suggests, eternal is better understood as infinitely DEEP rather than infinitely LONG. Abundant life is what Jesus calls it elsewhere, and it's about staying deeply connected to the eternal source of our abundance. To the fullness of the lives which we've been given.

The late Christian pastor, professor, theologian and mystic, Howard Thurman, captures the spirit of it at the end of his poem, "How Good To Center Down!"

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.

As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind –

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered,

Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round.

With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down!

That's what it means to have eternal life. That's what salvation is about. That's what it means to be born again. And again. And again.

To live with the peace of the Eternal in our step. To be in step with the possibility and promise of love and new life emerging even out of your darkest depths, when you wish you could crawl back into your mother's womb and stay awhile.

Even amidst the jangling echoes and turbulence of our lives and the world – when the world, or our part of it, exerts its most excruciating brokenness. When the world, or our part of it, is cold and dead.

That is a divine truth that is thankfully, and powerfully, reasserted every spring.

Remember that Lent comes from the Old English word meaning the lengthening of days. Lent, in this part of the world, takes us on a journey from winter to spring, from wilderness to resurrection, from death to life made new.

And so our invitation, this and every Lenten season, is to journey with Jesus through the wilderness toward the promised land. To take, as many times as it takes, the leap of UMBILICAL FAITH that keeps us connected and reconnected to, in step with, deeply grounded in, the eternal Source of love and life within and around us.

Imagine being born again today. With each new breath. No doubts or regrets, no guilt or accomplishments. No precedent, no expectations, no judgment, no requirements, no identity save that you are God's beloved.

Imagine being born again, cradled in the arms of your mother God. In closing, another poem from Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

*To be as involved in you as a fetus
As with you as a child on your hip*

*Swaddled in you
borne again and again
To be this small,
curled in your hand
My only world your eyes*

*my only land your arms
To have no style yet, no works
only breath
Utterly dependent
nursing at your miraculous breast
To learn to walk, to speak, to begin
and then tomorrow begin again
day after day
new, innocent, unknowing
Every day a precipice of discovery
of you, of me, of how to be
toddler-eyed at the wonder
of this world unfolding into me
the realm of the real again each day
as if for the first time amazed
Never to leave this umbilical faith
never to outgrow you*

May it be so.