

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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How Can We Be Born Again?

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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. - Genesis 12:1-4a

Jesus: ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.’ –
John 3:1-21

There is a story about a wise old Zen master who had a new student. This student talked all the time, his talking was like a dripping faucet that never seemed to stop, and it was not very long before the master decided that this was a trait that needed to be corrected. He suggested that he and his student have tea together, and they sat down and the Zen master began to pour the tea into the student's cup. The tea reached the brim of the cup, but the master kept pouring; the tea overflowed the cup and began to fill up the saucer, but the master kept pouring; the tea overflowed the saucer and ran all over the table, but the master kept pouring. Finally the student couldn't stand it any longer: he cried, "What are you doing? You're spilling the tea all over the place!" And the master said: "You are like this tea cup. You are so full of yourself that there is no more room for anything else. I can teach you nothing until you empty yourself to allow room for something new.”

This season of Lent is the season of the church year in which we acknowledge that in order to hear God's word, we must empty ourselves, create some space, some open-ness so that there is some room in our full lives and hearts for God's Word to speak. And we are joined in this season by a number of people who came through much struggle to realize that as well. We are joined this morning by Abram and Sarai, a couple who could not have children, and we will discover that sometimes it is in the emptiness of barrenness that we are opened to the possibility of new birth. And we are joined too by Jesus and Nicodemus, who help us to understand that there is more than one kind of birth.

Abram and Sarai were barren, a couple whose family had no future. In ancient times, even more so than today, your family was your immortality; children gave status, dignity, a sense of meaning and purpose to life. Not to have children was an open, bleeding wound that never seemed to heal. Abram and Sarai were barren, unable to conceive. The Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman suggests that this

barren-ness is a metaphor for the human condition. There are times in our lives and in history when human possibilities seem to offer no hope for the future, no possibility of a way out.

These times, between the end of something and the beginning of something new, are sometimes referred to as “liminal times.” The word liminal comes from the latin word *limina*, which means *threshold*, a space betwixt and between. Liminal times are in-between times, times of barrenness, times of wilderness, dry times. As we considered last week, wilderness times are not pleasant or fun times, but throughout history, they have been recognized as very important times, sacred times, times of enormous spiritual importance, because it is only when we realize that our cup is empty that we can allow it to be filled. Such times are the times “when all significant transformation happens,”¹ according to a popular writer [Richard Rohr]. It is perhaps only when our own resources have come up dry that we are open to the leading of God’s Spirit.

And that is why, I think, when Jesus speaks of the importance of being born from above, or born anew, or born again, he speaks of the Spirit which blows where it wills. Because when we are in a liminal time, a time of barrenness, we are out of control, we don’t know what will become of us. And it is that sense of being out of control that is perhaps most troublesome, most difficult.

A few years ago I wrote a song about this story. You may recognize the tune.
(from the television show *The Beverly Hillbillies*)

Let me tell you now a story about a man named Nick,
A rich Pharisee on whom life had played a trick.
The kinfolks said “there’s a man you better see”
So he loaded up his stuff and went to meet Je...

...sus, that is. Life-Giver. Sign-doer.

So he went to meet this man who had aroused such hope,
He swallowed down his pride and gave up trying to cope.
Jesus he went to see_, just before the morn,

¹“Grieving as Sacred Space,” *Sojourners*, Jan-Feb 2002, p. 21

And was told that to really live he must be reborn...

From above, that is, through water, through Spirit.

Well the first thing you know, Nick is real confused,
On matters anatomical he was heard to muse.
“Look,” Jesus said, “if you want to be free,
the only thing to do is to watch and follow me.”

Often, when people speak about being born again, they are referring to a specific experience, an experience of conversion, of being changed by the grace of Christ. Some people have a dramatic experience of such change, but for others it is a more gradual process. Many United Church people are suspicious of the language of being “born again” because people who believe there is only one way to become a Christian have claimed the phrase to refer to a dramatic conversion experience. It is an experience which seems to give them all the answers, and leave them with no doubts or questions, and in which they take an enormous sense of pride. Most of us, quite rightly, realize that there is something wrong with a conversion which takes all the mystery and uncertainty out of faith.

But I am not content to allow someone to claim the language of being born again and make it mean something narrow and inane. Jesus says that we cannot see the kingdom of God unless we have been born again, or born from above, or born anew. By that I think he means simply, that we have to always be open to the possibility of revelation. We have to always be aware that our teacup is empty and needs to be filled. But that does not mean that we are only born again once, or that it always happens in the same way. Personally, I think I have been born anew many times, and in many different ways. Whenever I learn to think of something in a new way, or do something differently than I have already done it, I think that is, in some small way, being born anew.

But there is one important thing about being born anew, and that is that it isn't something we do, any more than we give birth to ourselves. It is something God does with us. We can't predict or control it, any more than we get to choose our parents or decide the manner of our first birth. When Jesus says: “The Spirit blows where it wills,” he is suggesting that to be open to God's future we need to be open

to the movement of God's unpredictable Spirit, especially at times when we think the future is closed. It is when the future seems predictable that we most need to be reminded that the future is open and that birth can come in the midst of barrenness.

There was once a rabbi in a little town in Russia. He was a very wise and learned man, but after decades of prayer and meditation on the deepest spiritual issues in life, he came to the realization that, when it got down to rock bottom, he just didn't know.

Shortly after reaching that startling conclusion, he was walking across the village square on his way to the synagogue to pray. The Cossack, or local czarist cop of the village was in a bad mood that morning and thought he would take it out on the rabbi. So he yelled, "Hey Rabbi, where do you think you are going?"

The Rabbi was about to say, "To the synagogue," but he remembered his insight, and replied, "I don't know."

This infuriated the Cossack. "What do you mean you don't know where you're going? Every morning at eleven o'clock, you cross this square on your way to the synagogue to pray. You've been doing this for as long as I can remember, and here it is eleven o'clock in the morning and you are crossing the square in the direction of the synagogue and you try to tell me you don't know where you are going. You're trying to make a fool out of me and I'll teach you not to do that." So he dragged the rabbi off to the local jail. Just as he was about to throw him in jail, the rabbi turned and said, "You see, I thought I was going to the synagogue but actually, I was going to jail. You just don't know."

We wander through this vastly mysterious universe thinking we know when we don't, thinking our teacups are full when they are empty, and every now and then we discover we don't know squat. Such times are liminal times, sacred times, because it is only when we know that we are empty, that we are open to being filled, it is only when we realize that we are barren that we are open to being born again. Let us pray:

Gracious Spirit, blow in us this day, lead us forth, like Abraham and Sarah, onto the marvelous journey of faith, call us, like Nicodemus into the adventure of rebirth. Amen.

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about a man named Nick,
A rich Pharisee on whom life had played a trick.
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