

## Rebirth

Have you ever had what you would call an encounter with the divine, a moment that cannot be put into words, a moment you know something sacred has somehow transformed you, somehow put you in the presence of the Holy One if even for a breathtaking moment. These encounters are so difficult, if not actually impossible, to put into words, But at least let me try.

One such moment came years ago when I sat with Sarah and Ellen and had the sublime experience of hearing Roderick and Karl play Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue on organ and piano at Roderick's senior concert. As they played they became one, and the brilliant sounds that echoed in that sacred space transfixed, transported, transformed. It was all that great and true art can be. It somehow enters you, somehow takes you into itself. It does not, it cannot, stay on the outside. That is the point of this whole sermon; it is about something that comes into you from another place, another realm, or as Jesus said to Nicodemus, from above. You are open to it. It gets to you. It comes to you. It goes into your heart, your spirit, your core. That is the only way it happens. Whether you stand transfixed in front of Michelangelo's Pieta, or are transformed by great drama or transported by the impossible grace of the New York City Ballet. And beyond the arts, of course, it is what happens when the music or the words or the communion of worship transfix, transport, transform.

Moments like this also blessedly come during our Bible Study. I recall one time when I was reading the Sermon on the Mount as if for the very first time. For here, too, Jesus changes everything. His words happen to you. They enter you. If you let the words through; if you let the words in. And Richard Rohr, who seems to understand these things, wrote this:

As Saint Francis said. “The Ten Commandments are about creating social order (a good thing), but the eight Beatitudes of Jesus are all about incorporating what seems like disorder, which is much better. But no country or city, to my knowledge, has put a monument to the eight Beatitudes on their courthouse lawn. These are two very different levels of consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

What Father Rohr is saying is that the Beatitudes are about what is inside of you. Anger. Lust. Pride. Rancor. The transformation here comes when your behavior comes from what is inside of you, from your heart, from your very being. Encountering them changes you. Hearing them, really hearing them, taking them in, is transformative.

Reflecting on experiences when the divine broke through led me to think about what Jesus meant when he talked to Nicodemus and how that has been abused and misused over the millennia. Because I believe Jesus was saying that you have to get over yourself to encounter the divine. You have to let go of your position and status and what you think you know that is superior to what others know and follow me. I know what you are saying. I know what you are thinking. “I heard it all before, that born again stuff. So “whaddy gonna” tell me today that’s any different? Even people who know almost nothing about the Bible probably know that there is such a thing as John 3:16. The banners flap in the breeze at football games. Maybe they don’t distract the place kickers, but they do distract me. What the heck does that third chapter of John mean anyway?

Kids who grew up in Sunday Schools in the fifties could probably say: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whosoever believed in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Little kids are running around talkin’ ‘bout “begotten” when they probably

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Franciscan Media, 2014),

don't have a clue what begotten means. No wonder. Most theologians are still trying to figure it out. And what does it mean to perish? What does it mean to have everlasting life? What does it mean to be born again?

The language of John is so familiar that it has found its way into generic usage.<sup>2</sup> Think about it. An NFL star who is down and out returns to make an amazing, game-winning play. In the post-game interview he says: "Man, I felt like I was born again." A woman walks out of the spa, pampered and polished from head to toe: "I feel reborn". We hear it solemnly confided to a media guru by a rock star returning from his/her 17<sup>th</sup> trip to rehab, by a man running for President, by one who has lost weight. We hear it earnestly claimed by the repentant woman who says she has found Jesus behind prison bars. And, as you have heard me say before, we hear it used as an adjective before Christian to distinguish those who are born again Christians from those, I guess, who are not born again. We hear it in this context as a statement of superiority. But, however we hear it, by this diverse and extensive media exposure, this phrase has become part of the American lexicon, and, perhaps, part of our personal, religious vocabulary. "I have been born again." But what do they mean when they say it, and it is what Jesus was talking about?

"Are you born again?" is asked like "Who sent you?" behind the door of the Speakeasy. The right answer gets you in; the wrong answer means you are doomed, exiled, not allowed into the party. It is a question very much like: "Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Savior?" or "Are you saved? To those who know that language there is no doubt about the meaning. But to those from other Christian traditions, or, worse yet, from outside of Christianity, that language is baffling at best and damning at

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<sup>2</sup> <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkTrinity.htm>

worst. So now I ask you, you who have spent years in churches, you who have sat through so many sermons, you who have heard the phrase over and over: at this point in your faith journey what would it mean to you if you had that Nicodemus like exchange? What if you came out of your darkness to confront Jesus and say: “OK. Let me level with you. We’re not in church now. Let me tell you what I really think. Here is what I have heard about you. Here is what I sort of believe.” And after you said those things to him, what would he say to you? “Here’s what you need. Here’s what needs to change inside of you.”

But before we get biblical about it let’s think about how that theme, that theme of rebirth and transformation, is one of the primary themes of literature, of stage and cinema, of art, of prime time and day time TV, and even of popular music, although we might not recognize it. (As in: “You make me feel like a nat-ur-al woman.”) For what is more fascinating to us than frog into prince, nerd into prom queen, run-down house into extreme makeover, ugly corner lot into playground, pizza delivery boy into *American Idol*, bad boy into reluctant hero, town drunk into sober saint, *Scrooge* into Savior, *Grinch* into good guy, loser into winner? So many of the books we read, the plays we applaud, the movies we love, the TV that entertains us and the songs we sing in our cars and in our showers is some expression of this theme. We can’t get enough of it.

Consider how this powerful metaphor is explored just in sports films. How is *Rocky* reborn in that first wonderful film? What changes him? What finally transforms him from a punching bag into a powerhouse? What drives *Rudy* to play for the fighting Irish? How about the team in *Hoosiers*? How are they reborn? What about the always-fabulous Denzel Washington as the coach in *Remember the Titans*? How does the team have to be transformed?

How does he do it? What about the US Hockey Team in *Miracle*? What had to happen inside of each of them? What about the *Bad News Bears* and *The Mighty Ducks*? In each of these films and in thousands of other examples, isn't it true that the change, that the transformation, that the miraculous and sometimes painful birth of someone and something new, begins with belief, begins with a change of heart? Doesn't it begin with a new way of thinking, of seeing possibility, of imagining self? To be born is not our choice; to be born again is.

And just one more thought before we explore sacred texts. We are confronted, we are surrounded every day with our natural world in some stage of transformation. New saplings miraculously appear after forest fires. Grass grows through concrete. Ivy covers bricks. Butterflies emerge from cocoons. The sun starts over each morning focused not on what it illuminated before but on what it will illuminate today. Again and again and again is programmed into the very nerve center of our awesome, natural universe, and, if we don't see it, we are surely not looking. It is an "again" born not from chaos or darkness or disbelief. No. Sunrise and spring and all of those things are born from above.

William Loader explains the biblical story: "This sheds important light on the role of Nicodemus. He comes affirming a similar faith 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, because no one can do these miracles which you are doing unless God is with him.' (3:2) (Not a bad confession of faith! Certainly not negative.) **The issue is not Nicodemus, the unbeliever, but Nicodemus, the believer, facing Christ. The issue is not really conversion from unfaith to faith, (in other words from not believing at all to believing), but conversion from one kind of faith in Jesus to another.** It is getting the Christology right, or, in less technical

terms, understanding who Jesus really is, and that has consequences for one's spirituality, one's lifestyle."<sup>3</sup> If Nick's faith is to be the deep, complete faith Jesus sought, Nick must change. He cannot stay in his head. He has to let go. He has to let the music swim over him, engulf him. He has to let the Beatitudes wash over him, seep into him, like we pray it might when we worship or study or retreat.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth, uniquely expressed by Mark and Matthew, by Luke and Paul, by John and James, is exploding with the language and metaphor of rebirth. If you are a young puppet of a man, strings pulled by some wild eyed, good-for-nothing demon, you are reborn when Jesus sends that demon packing. If you are Simon's mother-in-law, down with the flu, and Jesus lifts you up out of bed to return to the work you love, you are reborn. If you are so paralyzed that it takes four friends to carry you to the house of the healer, and you walk away from the house carrying the mat you rode in on, you are reborn. If you are a filthy, stinking leper wailing "unclean, unclean" outside of the city gates and someone not only actually touches you but also heals you, you are reborn. If you are an adulteress about to be stoned to death for messing around; if you are a runaway who returns to the arms of a loving father; if you, if you, if you....Every story that Jesus lives and every story he tells is in some way a story of being born from above, from the power of faith, from the power of healing word and touch, from the power of God.

These are the biblical stories, the dramatic stories, the startling stories. But they are more than stories. They are the way; they are the truth; they are the Life! For each of us is somehow not ok. Each of us has things that keep us from being fully with God, fully with others, fully with ourselves. When

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

we read those stories we are not supposed to feel removed from them; we are supposed to become them. We are somehow blind. We are somehow outcast. We are somehow paralyzed. We are somehow demon-possessed. It is part of our humanity. But sometimes all of those things—our inability to see or to move or to join in or to tell the demon to go to hell—take on much more subtle and sophisticated forms. So each of us needs to ask: Is there a bitterness in me that needs to be sweetened? Is there an anger in me that needs to be worked through and released? Is there a grief that has immobilized me? How am I paralyzed? What are my demons? How am I blind? Am I so wrapped up in my ego-centered, narcissistic, little self that I cannot see anything? Am I mistaking religion for faith? In what way do I need to start over? In what way do I, like Nick, finally move from my kind of faith to **His** kind of faith?

What Jesus says to Nicodemus is that he must be born *anotnen*. And this not only means again; it means from above. Nicodemus is functioning based on a “this-world” paradigm. He plays by the corporate rules. He wears the corporate costume. His mental model only allows him to believe to a limited extent. “I know you are a good teacher. I know you have done cool things. I know what I can see, what I can hear, what I can measure.” “People like the Nicodemus stereotype remain at the level of miracles and fail to see what is really going on in Jesus and going on in believers who now live at this level of the Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> This leads to sanctuary Christianity, to people who live for one church instead of knowing that the church lives for other people. This leads to sanitized Christianity, safe Christianity. This leads to status quo sermons and a retreat to church as usual. This leads to never really letting go

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

of old self. All of this leads to a new way of being, a new way of living, a new you!

Being born from above the way that Jesus presents it to Nicodemus means profound and powerful changes in his life, changes that he probably doesn't want to make. It's not about going to church so that we can say: "...that was a lovely service I give the music a 9.2 and the sermon a 7.4, and didn't you just love the lilies?" No, when you see the way Jesus is asking Nick to see and change the way he is asking him to change "...you see the connection between Jesus and God and you see God in Jesus not trying to compete for adoration in the market of miracle workers, but seeking to establish a relationship of love and community. The focus is life. The means is relationship. The motive is love."<sup>5</sup>

The rebirth that Jesus offers is not the one that was expected by Nicodemus or the Centurion, by the woman at the well or the man on the mat, by the religious righteous or the Romans. The transformation was not the show of military might and dominant nationalism longed for by the Zealots or the pitch for purity preached by the Pharisees. He was not what they expected, this miracle man who didn't understand the meaning of the word dirty, the essence of the word weak, the threat of the word compassion. But they still had to admit he did some pretty cool stuff.

Never mind. His message was greater than any of those signs and miracles; as great as they were, they were just outward symbols of an even greater truth. We are called to rebirth. We are called to transformation. We are called to take that leap from the tentative to the certain, from the partial to the complete, from the "this" world paradigm to the "his" world paradigm, from being sort of alive to fully alive. Don't think for one moment

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

that he was just talking to Nick! Nope. Here's the thing: if you are going to hang up the signs, wear the tee shirts and boast the bumper stickers, you had better know what you are talking about. You better know that you are talking about something holy, miraculous, now and whatever forever is.

To be born from above is to be transfixed by the divine, to be transported from the addiction to ego to the grace of God. We get blessed glimpses of it, nearly imperceptible moments of it, holy, tear filled hints of it. And it is to this that Jesus called Nicodemus. Nothing less. In fact, something much, much more. And it is to this that Jesus calls each of us. This day, this very day, we are called to Life. We are not called to this so that we lived each day living in fear of death, so terrified that if we don't say the magic words we will be turned into charcoal. Rather we are called to a Life filled with assurance, peace, generosity, empathy love. Life! It starts now...and it just keeps going.

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. Zoom Gathering. August 30, 2020