Born Again, Born Anew (How Can These Things Be?)

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Several years ago, I was driving through Iowa on my way home from Nebraska, and out in the middle of nowhere in particular, a place given to low rolling hills and interstate, someone had nailed a sign to a dead tree. The sign, facing eastbound travelers on Interstate 80, said, in big block letters: “Trust Jesus.” The words hit my eyes coming around a curve in the road, and I remember the way my soul seemed to tighten up when I saw them, and a jumble of feelings rolled through me, but the feeling that rose to the top was that the words were dead to me. Empty. Hollow. And I remember thinking that there was nothing that could make those words live again for me.

I had, once, trusted Jesus. Finding Jesus had been the burning desire of my soul. Raised in the Catholic church, as a teenager, I started reading the gospel stories with new interest, and then in a church quite different from my own, an evangelical church whose members spoke about knowing Jesus personally, I went forward in an altar call. I went forward because I wanted to know Jesus personally. And I was born again, I was told, because I had asked Jesus into my heart. And for a while, it felt like I was at least a little bit new, a shinier version of myself. But over time -- and it was a long time -- and through many experiences, I felt that in the place of my yearning I was pointed only to a token, express assurance to heaven for my soul, with Jesus as the fare.

 It seemed undeniable that scripturally this was the sum of it; it was right there in 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.” A commentator notes that “[this] appears to be everybody’s favorite Bible verse, at least if we are to judge by hand painted signs seen in the endzone seats during field goal attempts.”1

In our gospel reading for today, Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, has seen signs in the ministry of Jesus, and he is searching for an understanding when he comes to Jesus by night, asking: “How can these things be?” He says, “Rabbi, 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.” And Jesus answers, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” Jesus points out that flesh is born of flesh, and spirit is born of the Spirit. He says: “Do not be astonished that I said this to you, that you must be born from above. 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.”

Do not be astonished. The wind blows where it chooses. But Nicodemus is astonished. How can these things be? For his question, he gets a question in return: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”Jesus is saying, it’s right there, Nicodemus, in our common tradition. Breath, wind, spirit, and unpredictability animates that tradition from beginning to end.

 There is the God who answers Job from a whirlwind. There is the voice who comes to the prophet Elijah, who hides in a cave, having run for his life. A great wind comes and it splits mountains and rocks in pieces, but God is not in the wind, and after the wind comes an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but God is not in the fire, and after the fire, a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah hears it, he wraps his face in his mantle and goes out and stands at the entrance of the cave. And he hears a voice saying: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

I wonder if that’s how the spirit comes to many of us. In the silence, when all the noise of the world around us stops. We may not be in the kind of trouble Elijah is, but one day the Spirit asks this question in you: What are you doing here? And you might answer, heck if I know. I don’t understand what I’m doing here, where my life is going, what it all means. And yet it tugs at you, this question: what are you doing here? What do you think it is asking of you? Of us, together as a congregation?

I think that many people have this question, even as many seem to move away from formal creeds and religion. It’s a longing and a calling as old as humankind. The question is not about a supposed contest between the kinds of explanations that science seeks, and the kind of experiences that spiritual traditions lift up, and whoever can come up with the best proof wins. Science looks for a different kind of validation and criteria; proof that can be assessed in a laboratory and is repeatable. You can only answer the question of what it means to exist with your life, and your life is not repeatable.

Something calls to us, something asks for us. What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to go into the deep of life?

Jesus points to breaking one’s self open, to the grain of seed that must fall into the ground and die in order to become more than a single grain, to the bread that must be broken and shared to become a community; he says that if you cling to your life you will lose it, and if you let your life go, you will save it. How can these things be?

Preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick said, “The glory of [Jesus’] life was that he revealed something eternal. He did not make it up. It was there before he came but he revealed it. If you try to keep Jesus as an ethical teacher only, you lose him as an ethical teacher. The only Christ who can stay with [us] is the Christ who says, “Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in [God] who sent me. “Then,” Fosdick says, “his ideas are not visionary, they are the upwelling of the eternal... Then it is true that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”2

 Jesus, all along, has pointed to a source beyond himself. The upwelling of the eternal is all around us. It is available to all of us, and it calls to us.

 But we forget that call to our deepest being and instead we believe the advertising, we believe Madison Avenue, we believe Caesar, we think they are the sources of life, that they own it and only they can confer it; we believe that life is what we take and grasp, and in our frantic attempts to have it, we silence the upwelling of the eternal in which we all “live and move and have our being” (Acts), we crush our brothers and sisters, we crush the earth and its creatures. In our great urgency to have life, we fail to give ourselves to it, to open ourselves to it, believing that self-giving can’t be trusted. We take ourselves back instead of giving ourselves.

What then must we do? This is the question the crowd asks when John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance, when the people begin to understand how far they have gone from the vision of life together in God. What then must we do? they ask. We are called into the deep.

In Romans, Paul writes: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3-4).

Newness of life begins with this walk into the deep. Even as Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about being born from above, he points out that the Son of Man must be lifted up. He is speaking about the cross, but Nicodemus can’t see it yet.

### Richard Rohr writes that “the path of descent is the path of transformation. Darkness, failure, relapse, death, and woundedness are our primary teachers, rather than ideas or doctrines.”3

How can these things be? How can this be the way to transformation?

In the story *Sonny’s Blues*, by James Baldwin, the narrator tells the story of hearing his younger brother, Sonny, play the piano in a nightclub. They grew up in Harlem together. Sonny had at one time been addicted to heroin and had spent time in prison. The brothers argued over Sonny’s dream to be a jazz musician. The older brother had promised their mother before she died that he wouldn’t let anything happen to Sonny. And he feels that he has failed, that Sonny’s drug use began with his connection to music, and thus he is suspicious of his brother’s longing for music. But he agrees to go to the nightclub to see his brother play, and as he sits in the audience watching, a member of the band, a man named Creole, begins to play the bass fiddle. Baldwin writes about how Creole begins to call Sonny out into the deep with his fiddle. He writes: “[Creole] was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny’s witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing--he had been there, and he knew. And he wanted Sonny to know. He was waiting for Sonny to do the things on the keys which would let Creole know that Sonny was in the water. And, while Creole listened, Sonny moved, deep within, exactly like someone in torment....

“I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument,” Baldwin writes. “He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. ...And Sonny hadn’t been near a piano for over a year...He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped; started another way, panicked, marked time, started again...And the face I saw on Sonny I’d never seen before. Everything had been burned out of it, and, at the same time, things usually hidden were being burned in, by the fire and the fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there.” Then the narrator hears his brother begin to fill the air with life, through the keys of the piano. “But that life contained so many others,” Baldwin writes. “Then [Sonny] began to make it his.... I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that we would never be free until we did. .. I heard what he had gone through and what he would continue to go through until he came to rest in the earth...And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever.”4 That is transformation.

In an essay on wounds and beauty, Bruce Herman cites the work of David Ford in his book, S*elf and Salvation: Being Transformed*: “Ford,” he writes, “Speaks of the human self being redeemed in and through community in the act of facing one another. This “facing” takes the form of the hospitable self; the self without idols; the worshipping self; the singing self and finally the Eucharistic self--the self-donating Christ-self.”5

A few weeks ago in this sanctuary we acknowledged that we are dust, and that we shall return to dust, and some of us wore ashes on our foreheads to remind us. Well, look around. Perhaps there is dust in this place, in those pews, in this pulpit, maybe more dust than we’d like to acknowledge. But this dust can live; it does live! Do not be astonished, or maybe: be astonished!

I go back in my mind to that church of my childhood, the church that I thought didn’t seem to know Jesus personally the way the more exciting church that I encountered as a teenager did.

One of the benefits of being a fidgety kid in that church before the Mass started, was that when I was very young, I would look around me, more concerned with curiosity than politeness. I would see in the pews around me, in various poses of prayer my ordinary neighbors, with head bowed or rosary in hand, perhaps with lips moving silently, and I would see that the man I encountered only as a cranky guy forever pushing his lawnmower across his yard, or the woman I saw with clothespins in her mouth fastening her family’s laundry to the line in the wind, each had some place inside them where they were seeking God. They were a mystery deeper than I could fathom just through ordinary appearances, and I saw something in them as they bowed in prayer that had escaped me just in daily passing. For a few moments, I saw this, and then we walked outside after the Mass and everyone appeared ordinary again. “It does not yet appear what we shall be,” the scriptures say. Week in and week out, we are transformed as we struggle to become a community following Jesus, as we become a new creature in Christ.

“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,” is about much more than being saved from this life through a transaction. It is about being born here. Belief is not faith as a suspension of intellect, it means trust, fidelity, that to which I give my life. If we listen it may take us into deep water, because it is counter to the many messages that fill the air, telling us to hide ourselves behind a shiny surface. If we listen, we hear an older message. It’s always been there. It asks us to leave the shoreline, to strike out for deep water. It tells us we’re together in this, that the only way to life is through giving everything back to it.

I go back to that day I saw the sign along an Iowa Interstate that said, “Trust Jesus,” It unsettled me with a mix of feelings, and I almost resented the way it was thrust into my view so suddenly. But once my feelings settled down, I was able to think more charitably about the person who posted it. He or she had had an experience, perhaps, something that changed everything, and this sign nailed to a dead tree was a way to try to offer hope to others. So many people cross Interstate 80 on their way to somewhere else. For me, the words were dead, I thought, but perhaps they would speak to someone else on the highway. I drove on, never dreaming that those words could live again for me. How can these things be? They can be. The wind keeps blowing.Amen.

1Swanson, Richard W., *Provoking the Gospel of John*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2010), 206.

2Fosdick, Harry Emerson, *A Preaching Ministry: Twenty-One Sermons Preached by Harry Emerson Fosdick at the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 1918-1925* (The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 2002), Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 3303-3306.

3”Seven Underlying Themes of Richard Rohr’s Teaching,” accessed March 10, 2015, <https://cac.org/dm-themes>

4Baldwin, James, “Sonny’s Blues*”* in *American Short Story Masterpieces*, ed. Raymond Carver and Tom Jenks, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1989), 30-32.

5Herman, Bruce, “Wounds and Beauty” in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands, and Roger Lundin, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 118.