

Sermon for March 5, 2023

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Genesis 12:1-4a Psalm 121 Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 John 3:1-17

The Breath of Life Sweeps Through Us

It was on the darkest of nights that Joseph of Arimathea and I, Nicodemus, a secret follower of Jesus, brought down the cross with its heavy burden. We removed the bloody nails and the torturous crown, and carried the body through silent streets to my house. There we anointed Jesus' broken body for burial. We wrapped it in clean white linen and laid it on a shelf built into a new tomb. We sealed the opening with a huge stone and went again into hiding. And I thought back to another dark night when I first met with Jesus.

All had been in darkness that night too. I left my elegant, gated, Jerusalem home with its gardens and fountains and I stealthily moved through the poorer area of the city to seek out Jesus. And as I walked, I thought about my life, my birth into generations of Pharisees. My own very high honour standing had come as my birthright. My life had been devoted to teaching God's laws, grown from ten to six hundred and thirteen laws. As a teacher, I guided the Judean people in their faithfulness to Israel's God, losing none of that honour I was born with.

And as I walked in the dark, I wondered if the dark city was mirroring the dark places in my soul. Somehow I felt empty, though some would say I had it all: wealth, respect, power.

I had been hearing about this Jesus of Nazareth and the stories were confusing. On the one hand, being from Nazareth, surely he was a person of very low honour. Born out of wedlock and in a stable among animals, was he? No

family honour there. Apparently he worked as an itinerant artisan, a carpenter. He was one of those who left their womenfolk at home and unprotected when they travelled and worked. His work required meeting strangers, sleeping and eating with the unwashed. Shameful, I thought.

On the other hand, I'd heard about Jesus performing signs: that wedding in Cana where he'd changed water into wine; the growing number of followers he'd attracted; and his teaching of people, telling them to set aside the 613 laws and obey only the 10 from Moses. By what authority does he teach, I asked myself.

I remember how full of questions I was when I reached the house where Jesus was staying. Seeing Jesus, I began by addressing him respectfully. "Teacher," I began, "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."

I recall feeling I was making a complete fool of myself that night. I'd heard some people saying this Jesus, from Nazareth of all places, really was the Son of God, come from heaven. That would mean he had the highest honour rating next to God. How can this be, I wondered aloud.

I was even more in the dark when Jesus spoke. It felt strange. One teacher teaching another teacher. Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God. That's right. Not the Roman Empire but the kingdom of God. And he went on to say one needed to be born from above to get there. Well, now I was the pupil and he the teacher. I asked him, does he mean I would have to be born from heaven? Or maybe that I'd have to be born again, even though I'm an old man and my mother is long dead? Does he always teach in riddles? It seemed as if Jesus was speaking

in code. Birth is not about the body, I learned, not about the flesh and blood, but about spirit. It was confusing.

And yet, I later remembered, I didn't back away from the darkness of my unknowing. I stayed there, humble, a learner. Jesus spoke of one who descended from heaven and of the Son of Man lifted up so that the world through him might be saved. Not so strange, then. The Pharisees, after all, believe in resurrection at the end of time, when all the faithful will be lifted up from the grave by God. I didn't know then about that other lifting up that would come with Jesus' crucifixion.

Still, I felt the darkness lifting now that Jesus had answered one of my questions: who was this Jesus? He as much as said he was the Son of God, come from heaven. It felt like a glimmer of light. I still had to think deeply about what the kingdom of God was and what being born from above was. But Jesus had answered me. He said I needed to be born of water and the Spirit.

Maybe he heard my sigh of frustration. He said, consolingly, "Do not be astonished." It was as if he was saying, I know. It's a lot to take in. But think of what you know already of the Spirit.

What I knew was that it was God's Spirit, the Breath of God, the Wind of God that moved over the face of the waters at creation. It was the Breath, the Wind, that swept over the chaos and created light. I knew that same Spirit led Israel out of slavery; kept our people safe in desert and wilderness; led them, cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, to the Promised Land. I knew the prophets were imbued with God's Spirit and told what they were to speak.

Yes, I knew that Spirit, always giving birth, always creating life. As impossible to control as the wind but having enormous power and energy. Jesus told me I could be reborn by that Spirit if my desire was to see the kingdom of God.

I admit I blurted out, “How can these things be?” And he said to me three times, “Very truly, I tell you...” I was seeking the truth from him and he told me the truth: that is possible to know sky things, heavenly things; that I could learn from him. That he was the one who had access to the heavens, who ascends and descends between heaven and earth.

He was still using some unfamiliar language but he seemed to say that everything about new birth and new life would be clear to his followers when he would be lifted up. I was to learn later that being “lifted up” was a metaphor about the manner of his death.

In that moment I became a follower. I would learn the language of the group, the family, Jesus was building. One learns by being drawn into community by baptism and never dying. Eternal life was freely spoken about in that community. Eternal life is life animated by the Spirit. It's life enlivened, energized, enriched by the Spirit. It is a richer quality of life available to us as individuals and as community. For there is within us, the baptized and the seekers, something that yearns for a richer life, a way out of the darkness of unknowing; a life with a focus, with ethics, with devotion.

I knew I still lived in the Roman Empire and within the wider world, but even there it was possible to be a member of an anti-society, loyal to Jesus and to each other and honouring the Spirit, the Breath, the Wind of God that created

and still creates, through us, frail flesh that we are, a world of justice, of peace and abundance for all. That is eternal life.

Amen.