

“Breath of Life”

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for
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My favorite author, Marcus Borg, tells the following true story about a three-year-old girl. I know that some of you have heard this one before, while others of you have not. Regardless, it is a remarkable story and worth our attention.

She was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother was pregnant again, and the little girl was very excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door shut made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby’s arrival, so they realized they could let their daughter do this, and if they heard the slightest indication that anything strange was happening, they could be in the baby’s room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go into the baby’s room, shut the door, and raced to the intercom listening station. They heard their daughter’s footsteps moving across the baby’s room, imagining her standing over the baby’s crib, and then they heard her saying to her three-day-old brother, “Tell me about God—I’ve almost forgotten.”¹

“Tell me about God—I’ve almost forgotten.” Those simple and profound words seem to suggest that we are born with an unblemished knowledge of God that we keep for a time. Maybe that’s why very young children are generally happy, loving, trusting, forgiving, creative, and inquisitive. They see the world as both magical and real, a place indistinguishable from themselves and where anything is possible. Their lives openly reflect the memory of God’s spirit.

As we mature from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, we grow more and more self-aware and self-concerned, perceiving ourselves to be separate from the world.² We often live into exile from God and lose the special life-giving connection we had with the Holy One when we were born. Borg describes this process of increasing isolation from God as the, “fall,” a term generally related to the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from Paradise.³ Our personal “falls” lead each of us to be fearful of the world, self-centered and independent, hard-hearted in our relationships with others. We learn to forget our true identities as the beloved of God, something that brings real meaning to our lives. We lose the wonder and joy of being carefree and alive.

O, to be a child again and at home with God! Sounds impossible, doesn’t it? However, I can assure you that it’s not. We can regain what has been lost for many of us by being what’s called “born again.”

That phrase, “born again,” has its origins in today’s gospel lesson of John 3:1-12. In recent years, it has become associated with Christians who have a sudden or gradual personal transformation, sometimes linked to mystical experiences. Quite often those occurrences have led many to practice their faith in ways that are ultraorthodox, judgmental, and exclusionary.⁴ But, is that what being “born again” is all about? A careful reading of our gospel lesson provides us with an answer.

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2003): 113-114.

² Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The text of John 3:1-12 is a teaching narrative created by the gospel writer and his faith community. It captures the true essence of Jesus' teachings and conveys it through rich symbols.⁵ The story opens by drawing our attention to Nicodemus, described as, "a Pharisee" and "a member of the Jewish ruling council" (John 3:1, New International Version). Nicodemus represents a group of wealthy religious reformers who sometimes opposed Jesus and were members of the Sanhedrin.⁶ The next verse says of Nicodemus, "He came to Jesus at night" (John 3:2, New International Version). This part of the account tells us that Nicodemus visited Jesus secretly because he realized that he had lost his way in terms of the true practice of faithfulness to God.⁷ Nicodemus then goes on to address Jesus as "Rabbi" and tells him, "[W]e all know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him" (John 3:2, New International Version). In other words, Nicodemus and his fellow reformers viewed Jesus as a respected wisdom teacher and sought to learn from him the best way to study the Law of Moses and enact it in their lives, as well as offer proper worship to God.⁸

Jesus responded to Nicodemus by focusing on what seemed like a different topic. He stated, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3, New International Version). Bewildered by Jesus' statement, Nicodemus said to him in John 3:4 (New International Version), "How can someone be born when they are old?" and "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" Jesus then replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again'" (John 3:5-7, New International Version).

At first, it appears that reference is being made to the Christian ritual of baptism as a necessary requirement for entering the Kingdom of God. However, there is something else being asserted and it has to do with the ancient meaning of "born again." The phrase "born again" should be more properly translated from Greek into English as "born of the Spirit."⁹ An even better rendering of the phrase would be "born of the breath of life."¹⁰ The words, "Spirit" and "breath," as well as "wind," were synonyms for each other and understood to have their origins in God.¹¹ Taken all together, this means the phrase "born again" refers to an individual's transformation by the active presence of God's life-giving spirit or breath in his or her life.¹² It points to the possibility of once again having a child-like relationship with God and the world.

God's spirit or breath of life was understood in biblical times as a creative power that continually brings the universe into existence and is constantly present. It was the force that separated life from lifelessness and animated all living things in a variety of ways.¹³ Interestingly, this notion of God's breath of life has been affirmed in modern times by the work of the great scientist, Albert Einstein.

Einstein recognized that God's spirit is revealed in the physical world as a "universal principle" that supports, surrounds, and permeates everything. Its relationship to the universe is like what can be seen with a Möbius loop, with one side representing the physical world and the other the spiritual

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ James Rowe Adams, "Pharisee," in *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2005): 217-218; and Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ Levine and Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*.

⁸ Adams, "Pharisee."

⁹ Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*.

¹⁰ James Rowe Adams, "Spirit, spiritual," in *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2005): 285-288.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*.

¹³ James Rowe Adams, "Spirit, spiritual," in *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2005): 285-288.

realm.¹⁴ If you view it from different angles, you can imagine the spiritual realm being present under, over, and alongside the physical world. Further, Einstein believed God's breath caused order and harmony to emerge out of chaos and discord. It provides purpose and direction to the world, as well as balance and interconnectedness. God's life-giving spirit, from Einstein's perspective, encourages change and liberation, a building up for the better.¹⁵

How does God's breath of life cause these things to happen or bring about an individual's transformation? No one knows. Using the word "wind" as a synonym for "breath," Jesus is portrayed saying in John 3:8 (New International Version), "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

What can be said with certainty about God's breath of life is that it is something that draws us closer to God and aligns our lives with the Holy One, just as took place for Abraham in this morning's scripture text of Genesis 12:1-4. The spirit opened Abraham to God's call, to trust the Holy One, and to leave behind his former life. God's breath of life is the fundamental source of our faithfulness.

This truth is what Jesus was trying to tell Nicodemus in today's gospel lesson. Nicodemus came to Jesus as a literalist who supposed that faithfulness to God was achieved primarily by good deeds, studying scripture, and following strict rules of living and worship. But, Jesus told him that those kinds of efforts were not enough to develop true faithfulness to God. Such an approach could too easily lead to a faith that was inflexible, disparaging of others, and self-serving. Faithfulness could only be practiced if attention was given first and foremost to God's breath of life, present within and around us. That would promote the birth of a faith that was creative, adaptable to different times and places, and reflected God's desire that we should seek the wellbeing of all people.

This understanding is echoed in the words of the Apostle Paul. Regarding Abraham and his faithfulness, Paul states in Romans 4:2-3 (New International Version), "If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'"

God's spirit, recognized and embraced in our lives, is the force that helps us to be "born of the breath of life," to experience a rebirth. Through it, we can regain a special life-giving connection with God, much like we once had as very young children. We can live in joyful awe of a world that is friendly and kind, both material and filled with the spirit of God.

While we may never understand how God's breath transforms lives, we can encourage it to happen in our own. As Marcus Borg points out, this requires focus and determination. It demands such spiritual practices as ongoing conscious awareness that we live and move and have our existence in God. It necessitates paying attention to our relationship with God through prayer, scripture reading, worship, and service to others. It requires us to actively work at deepening our relationship with God, giving our lives more and more to the Holy One, and permitting God's character to radiate from our living and loving. In the process of doing these spiritual practices, we become "born of the breath of life."¹⁶

How often do we look at little children and remember they are a gift from God? Do we see them as an expression of God's spirit or breath of life in the world? Do we sometimes long to say to them, "Tell me about God—I've almost forgotten." We can remember and let the dynamic breath of life blow through our lives, just as children do. Take the time to cultivate the Holy One's active presence in you with intentional spiritual practices. Be "born of the breath from above." Amen.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Vondey, "The Holy Spirit and the Physical Universe: The Impact of Scientific Paradigm Shifts on Contemporary Pneumatology," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2009): 3-36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*.