

New Birth (Part Two)

“Unless he is born again”

Reflection 48 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Born again?

Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus as recorded in John 3:1-8 is the text that in our time raises the question, “Are you born again?” As in “Are you a born-again Christian?” And of course, in the way that Jesus meant the term, yes, emphatically yes. But for many people today, this question really means, “Are you self-righteous, arrogant and judgmental? Do you seek to impose your values on the rest of us?” In our own heritage, in the Churches of Christ, this text has become for some a proof-text for the absolute necessity of baptism, that is, for immersion in water specifically for the forgiveness of sins. And it’s said, on the basis of this text, that you can’t get to Heaven unless you are baptized. If you’re not baptized by immersion for the forgiveness of sins, regardless of how good you are or how deep is your faith, you’re doomed to excruciating torment in the fires of Hell forever and ever and ever. Never mind the horrifying picture of God this suggests. It’s not what Jesus is saying here. Again it’s reading our answers to our debates into a text making a very different point. A much larger point.

Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God there and then, here and now, not about Heaven and Hell. He’s talking about the worldwide revolution he came to launch. He’s talking about God’s kingdom of love and forgiveness filling the earth. He’s talking about love for all people becoming the way we live and think and act. Which is hard. Which we don’t do naturally. And he’s saying that unless you’re radically reborn from above, you will never experience or participate in this kingdom. And little Aylans will keep washing up on Mediterranean shores. Or ours.

In a way, Jesus is saying something that thoughtful people across the ages and across cultures have always known – that people need turning points in life, transforming moments, rites of passage in which they break from old ways of doing things, in which they pass through a kind of death experience from which they rise to new life, to larger life, and then are incorporated into a mature community of faith, now charged with supernatural energy and feeling reborn, rejuvenated, transformed, consecrated, and connected to God, the universe and others. All world mythologies recognize this. Psychologists call this the ego death, when a person moves from a relatively limited way of experiencing themselves to a new and expanded way that transcends the ego or the self. Old personality structures “die.” Unsuccessful ways of being in the world “die.” One’s ego dies so that a larger self-definition becomes available and a larger, more expansive life becomes possible. And maybe we start seeing the connections, the connection between how I live and how Aylan dies.

It is this primal human need that Jesus is addressing that night with Nicodemus – that you, Nicodemus, a religious leader, someone who has devoted his entire life to being right with God, still have to undergo your own personal turning point, your own transforming moment, your own ego death, and your own rebirth to a larger and kinder

understanding of life and God and other people. Everything depends on this. New birth. New life. A new world.

And, yes, Jesus is talking about baptism. Nothing else ever imagined – other than immersion in water – so imprints on the human soul life’s central and most primal truths, death to the old self, to the old ways, cleanness, forgiveness, innocence, and spiritual rebirth or resurrection. And everyone on earth needs it, from the desolate hills of Afghanistan to the apparently respectable suburbs of America. But still this one fact remains. It’s a far, far deeper truth than just getting wet in some ritual however meaningful. Every human being, sooner or later, has to experience a turning point, a radical rebirth from above, a transforming moment, a new birth, a rite of passage in which they break from old ways of doing things, in which they pass through a kind of death experience from which they rise to new life, to larger life, and then are incorporated into a mature community of faith, now charged with supernatural energy and feeling reborn, rejuvenated, transformed, consecrated, and connected to God, the universe and others.

And with this rite of passage they enter a larger and kinder story.ⁱ Prostitutes leave behind a story in which men pay them money for sex and enter a story in which God in love freely dies for them. Pharisees leave behind a story of judgment and exclusiveness, a story that focuses only on their own little group, and enter an inclusive story of forgiveness and love for all people. Zealots like Simon leave behind a story of responding to violence with violence and enter a story of peace for all peoples, in which they choose suffering themselves rather than causing others to suffer. Tax collectors like Matthew leave behind a story of collaborating with the Roman Empire and enter a story of collaborating with the kingdom of God. And we in the West amidst wealth never before imagined care about little three-year-old boys in war-weary Syria, or warlord-devastated parts of Africa, or druglord-devastated Central America, or in our own inner cities. When we are radically, utterly, completely, reborn from above. And then a new world in the morning becomes possible. But it’s not simply a matter of church affiliation. It’s a matter of seeing more, loving more, and living new life, larger life.

To this everyone is called – if you’ve not already experienced it, to come to your transforming moment, when you break from old ways of doing things, when you pass through a kind of death experience from which you rise to new life, to larger life, and then are incorporated into a mature community of faith, but now charged with supernatural energy and feeling reborn, rejuvenated, transformed, consecrated, and connected to God, the universe and others. Being born again is part of the coming new world in the morning. In fact, a new world in the morning cannot happen without new birth for: Me. You. A dozen here, a dozen there. 120 somewhere else. 5,000. 10,000. 12 times 12 times 10,000. Millions upon millions.

– Dale Pauls

ⁱ This section indebted to Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 169.