

# The Uncontrollable Wind

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Lent II

Genesis 12: 1 – 4a

John 3: 1 - 17

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Life, at its very essence, is mysterious. What lies between birth and death, those two mysteries in themselves, is the greatest mystery. We do not know what to expect. We do not have the plan. Like the blowing of the wind, we do not have complete control; the mystery resides in God. The way that we enter that mystery, is what we call faith. "The Wind blows where it chooses."

Birthplace. Is it an important place in your personal history? Does it have meaning for you?

There are lots of birth places that claim to be important. I'm thinking of those places where famous – or the infamous – are from. Those locations gain a certain notoriety. They become places of legend, projecting themselves into the future even, as if the famous one might never have become so, without the characteristics of this special place of birth. Strange isn't it? Consider for a moment the website description for the natal home of The King.

The Birthplace of Elvis Presley in Tupelo, Mississippi is the only location in the world where you can see, feel and touch where the King of Rock & Roll began his musical journey.

Only in Tupelo can you walk into the room where he breathed his first breath, take a stroll to his favourite location as a boy to relax looking over Tupelo, and see first hand how it all shaped this young boy from Mississippi into the international rock & roll music legend he is today.

Similar things get said for Prime Ministers, Presidents, movie stars, pop singers and astronauts. For those who are famous, in some way, the place of birth is significant. Well, what about for the rest of us? It is somewhat notable. It has meaning for us. Many of us will have heard some story-telling around our birth, about the place. "There, that's place," I remember being told as we would drive past St. Joseph's Hospital in London. "Your dad waited up there in that room, the one on the corner with the window." Several decades and a revolution later, in another city and another hospital, not in the waiting room but there in the midst of it all, I watched and cried and tried to be as sympathetic

as possible with the mystery as Leah and Anna came into the world. Their birth place I will always remember and tell them about from my perspective. I've even got pictures. In most families, but not in all, it is part of the lore, it is part of the story, and it is part of the family legend.

Abraham's birthplace was in an ancient city called Ur, in Lower Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. We might visualize it today as somewhat corresponding to the country of Iraq, adjacent to the Persian Gulf. The Bible tells us of Abraham's family origins in Ur, but the real notoriety, of course, comes as a result of him leaving there. Abraham's father, Terah, took the family from Ur, up the fertile river valley to the city of Haran, in the northwest. From that place, the great biblical story of faithfulness unfolds. The birthplace of a new people emerges. It is in Haran, that Abraham hears a call from God. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Gen. 12:1) 'Leave the land of your birth, the place of your ancestors. Go to a new land. I will show you a new land,' says the Holy One. Like the wind swirling amid the hot sands, a mysterious new life stirring. A people are coming to life. Abraham doesn't know what is coming. No one knows. The mystery resides in God.

One of the ways that we come to know about the mystery is through Jesus and the encounters of his life. Some days the mystery gets clearer, some days it doesn't. We have a story tradition of the birth and the birth place – does it help? Some days. For some people. We have a traditional presentation of his baptism, of his encounters with John the baptizer. Those stories shed some light on the mystery of life that resides in God. Some days. And, in other stories, we overhear Jesus in conversation with different kinds of people – conversations that are revealing in themselves of the mystery. One of those encounters, those conversations, takes place with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a leader among the Jewish community. It was night; a time when mystery is heightened. When the wind is calm. When darkness blankets the landscape. It is night; there is little light. For the story-teller John, this is a way of conveying the mystery of God. Night. An environment that suggests confusion and misunderstanding and potential danger. For John, it means more that the opposite of daytime.

The subject of this night time conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is God. The learned one, Nicodemus, a 'teacher of Israel', claims that Jesus has 'come from God.' All that Jesus has been doing, all the signs that he has show, indicate that this must be true. "Jesus, we know that you are from God." (John 3:2)

Jesus doesn't deny this, but tells Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God, without being born 'from above'. Remember, it is night, there is confusion, misunderstanding. 'Born from above' Nicodemus hears as a need to be 'born again'. "How can this be?" the Pharisee protests. Not what Jesus said, but one of those shifts in meanings that can happen. At night. Born from above, born again, re-born – all could be understood that way. Nicodemus, in this confused conversation, keeps wondering about the mystery. He is curious and he is speculating. How can an old man be born again? How can one enter into the mother's womb and be born again? How can this be?

Jesus engages the mystery as he engages the man. He is thinking of a spiritual birth, a birthplace with God. He is talking about something special and new with God. It is beyond life in this world. It is like being born with God, 'from above'.

It is easy to put that into a slogan: that to be a true believer you must be 'born again'. And it is equally simplistic to dismiss this. Being born from above, being born all over again, leaving the place of your birth on earth and responding to an Abrahamic call from God to a new life – all of this is worth deep consideration. Jesus is not much interested in a formula to provide access to special status with God. He is not much interested in an elite group of believers; those who are 'born again' and those who aren't. He seems willing, quite willing, to talk with all kinds of folks – as different as night and day - inviting them all to consider 'new life' with God. And the imagery of birth is the most intimate, the most human, the most God-embracing language: one only comes close to the new reign of God by way of a re-birth from above. Once again, the language of human life and God's realm mix in way people encounter Jesus.

Are we willing to consider this? This re-birth. It seems to mean that the old birth is set aside. The birthplace is past. The homeland fades in the distance. Are we willing to give up something? Are we willing to leave the familiar and the homey, the old birthplace and the familiar territory? Are will willing to enter into new experience, to open ourselves to new learning, to a new world that is God-centered and God-given? God's world where the wind blows where it chooses, where the wind of God is uncontrollable.

Young Brian O'Connell, comes to terms with the realities of life and death – and the mystery of living in between those - in the swirling dust of a Saskatchewan Depression era town. As the protagonist of W. O. Mitchell's classic Canadian novel, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Brian faces growing up amid the injustice and cruelty of life in the world. Just like Nicodemus who asked repeatedly, "How can this be?" Brian bellows out his own questions as he tries to understand human life, "Why did people die? Why did they finish up? What was the good in being ... human?"<sup>1</sup>

Where ever he turns, Brian is touched by the wind on the prairie. "...all about him was the wind... a pervasive sighing through great emptiness, unhampered by the buildings of the town, warm and living against his face and in his hair."<sup>2</sup>

The wind blows where it chooses. That's how Jesus confronts Nicodemus' incredulity about God's invitation to new life: How can this be? Well, if you have ears to hear, if you will just stop and think, if you will just take a moment, if you will just breathe, if you will just listen to the wind .... The wind of God's loving, gracious, birthing Spirit is all about you. It is not to be controlled. It blows through all of life and all of creation and it inspires. It breathes new life into the world. Into each one of us. If we are willing to be made new, born all over again, as if from above.

There is something in the way John presents this that is at once risky, unsettling and totally liberating. Without concern for the place of our birth, for our homelands, for our ancestral line, God calls us with uncontrolled power, love and grace: come with me

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<sup>1</sup> W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen The Wind* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1972 [1947]), p. 298.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

into a new land, like old Abraham and Sarah. Come with me. I'm not going to tell you all that will happen. But come anyway. Come with me. Trust me. Have faith. Come along in the mystery of wind-blown life.

Do you remember the place of your birth? Is it memorable, part of your spiritual autobiography? And what about your re-birth? Where did it happen? When was it? What were the circumstances? What has it meant to you?

Giving up the old life means loss. Perhaps, like learned, sophisticated, privileged Nicodemus, we have much to lose. Perhaps like Abraham, we are called to leave everything we have known, everything that has given us security, status, and comfort. That may be re-birth. Can we enter into the womb and be re-born? Can a couple re-ground their relationship when it has been upset or disconnected? Can a parent and child – even an adult child – rediscover what once bound them together and may have broken them apart? Can a life torn in shreds be filled with the breath of new life so that like a colourful and warm quilt, pieces once again become whole?

I believe that, if we live, if we really live, we are re-born many, many times over and over again. In the moments of insight that pain can bring. In the moments of truth that a hurtful comment can instill. In the truth of a child's gaze that simply will not allow avoidance. In the learning moment that comes with a price, in the gift of generosity that one can never repay. We are born again. I don't allow that phrase to be co-opted by simplicity. It is my own belief – and perhaps it is yours as well: God loves us like the wind that swirls and twists and tugs and ... laps softly at our cheeks. Uncontrollably. Out of our control. That great gusting love of God, gives us new birth – time after time after time – and we are made new.

It is that great wind of God that dries our 'vain regretful tears' that 'will not let us drift'. That gives us hope and sets us free. To God – uncontrollable wind – be all praise and glory for ever and ever. AMEN