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2 Lent, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[Genesis 12:1-4a](#)

[Psalms 121](#)

[Romans 4:1-5, 13-17](#)

[John 3:1-17](#)

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When I was a kid I was fascinated with optical illusions.

You've probably seen some of these. There's a famous picture that can look either like a rabbit or a duck. Your eyes and brain might shift focus and it almost seems to snap back and forth: the shape of two ears suddenly becoming a duck bill, and back again. There's another that looks either like an old woman or a young lady. Or a drawing of a cube that can seem to face upward or downward depending on which square you see as the front.

The thing about these clever pictures is that there's not just one right answer. You could argue: "It's a duck! No, it's a bunny!" But there's no point. It's both. The picture is the picture. The difference is in the interpretation.

I feel that way about our reading from John's gospel this morning, which contains at least three instances of marvelous ambiguity. The first is when Jesus says to Nicodemus, "No one can see God's kingdom without being born from above."

That phrase "born from above" is a choice our translation makes. Others say "born again," an equally good translation but with different associations, especially today where in modern evangelical Protestantism being "born again" means a conscious conversion experience. The Greek word *anōthen* can mean either "from above" or "again"—something like our English expression "from the top," which can mean a literal direction or "again," as in "take it from the top." But in Greek these wouldn't have felt like two different meanings so much as different shades of a single word.

Nicodemus understands it as "born again" and takes it literally, asking about entering back into the womb. But Jesus means something different and goes on to talk about being born of the Spirit.

Except that word too is ambiguous. In both Hebrew and Greek, the same word can mean wind, breath, or spirit. In Greek it's *pneuma*, which we still use in words about air and breathing, like pneumatic or pneumonia. Our modern concept of "spirit" tends to be pretty immaterial. But in Scripture, spirit is tangible and powerful, so much so that it shares a word with breath and wind. Our translation fudges it by rendering *pneuma* as "wind" in "The wind blows where it chooses" and "spirit" in "born of the Spirit." But in Greek it's like the bunny and the duck: the word is both at once.

Imagine this passage translated with the word *wind* throughout: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and wind. What is born of flesh is flesh, what is born of wind is wind. The wind blows where it chooses, and you do not know where it comes from or goes. So it is with everyone born of the wind.” Like the wind, God’s Spirit is wild. You can’t see it or control it, but you can feel it. You know it by its effects.

Finally Jesus speaks about himself: “The Son of Man must be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” He’s just been talking about descending and ascending, so “lifted up” might seem to mean a glorious ascension into heaven. But he also refers to a story from Exodus where the people in the desert were bitten by snakes, and Moses made a brass serpent on a pole so that whoever looked at it was healed. So being lifted up on the pole is a reference to Jesus being literally lifted up on the cross—seemingly the opposite of heavenly glory. Yet when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, that will be precisely the moment of his greatest victory. In John’s gospel, and in our faith, Jesus’ crucifixion and his glory aren’t opposites but two ways of seeing the exact same thing.

“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” Jesus says. I think part of what “seeing the kingdom of God” means is learning to see reality in more than one way. Nothing is only what it seems. From the perspective of God, the unsavory execution of a small-time prophet is the gate of eternal life. The daily lives of you and me are the arena of a powerful battle where the Spirit is triumphing over evil. The good news of Jesus doesn’t remove us from the ordinary world. It shifts our perspective so that the ordinary becomes the heavenly without ceasing to be ordinary.

Are we born again, or born from above? Do we take the initiative in coming to faith, or is the initiative God's? Is Jesus talking about wind or Spirit? About ascending into glory or being nailed on a post to die? Are you and I bits of dust who pass into oblivion, or beings of glory with an eternal destiny? Yes, yes, yes, and yes; to all of it.

And maybe that helps us understand the most famous verse in this passage, John 3:16: "everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Perhaps it's not so much that you believe now and get eternal life later as a reward, as that believing in Jesus makes our lives here and now take on a richer, sharper, three-dimensional quality: real life, abundant life. "Eternal" isn't so much about duration as about character. It's life lived in the presence of God that continues forever but starts right here and now.

So here we are today to say a prayer over some bread and wine, then pass it around and go home. And here we are to step up to the gate of eternity, join the angels of heaven, take our places as the priests of all God's precious creation, and come face to face with the Alpha and the Omega who delights to leap right down into the palm of our hands. It's all in how you look at it. And both are true. So let's move forward with this mystery of grace in the ordinary, enlivened by the Wind of God that moves and works and prays in us as God wills.