

A while ago I read about a Minneapolis businessman named Ward Brehm, who with no warning at all began to see his life being turned upside down. It all started when his minister stopped him after church one day and asked him if he'd like to go to Africa. "He might as well have asked me if I'd like to go to the moon," Brehm said.

Seeing his resistance, the pastor asked, "Will you pray about it?" Brehm looked him square in the eye and said, "Arthur, you're the minister, you pray about it. I'll think about it."

About two months later this businessman found himself at an airport with a ticket booked to Ethiopia. But there were more surprises ahead. When he finally met up with the group he would be traveling with, they were surrounded by a group of "church ladies," as he called them, there to send them off. This isn't looking good, he thought. And just before they boarded, the group decided to hold hands and pray right there in the airport lounge. Brehm said he prayed all right, but his prayer was that none of his clients or business partners would walk by and see him.

Well, they went off for ten days in Africa. And, he says, he's never been the same. "The moment I stepped onto African soil," he said, "my life was altered." He saw a world that before had only existed for him as a set of statistics. In Ethiopia he listened to surviving family members telling stories of loved ones lost during the years of famine; in Uganda he saw people everywhere dying of AIDS. For the first time, the senselessness of people starving to death overwhelmed him.

Brehm's experience began to scramble the ways he had put his life together. As he puts it in his book, "White Man Walking," everything he thought he knew about the world, his life, and God was up for grabs. God seemed intensely close, much closer than back home. Back there, he thought, with all our comfort and privileges, we are usually only able to see God when things fall apart. Now he was beginning to see God everywhere.

And he recalled an old saying, that sometimes God uses a pebble to get a person's attention. If that doesn't work, sometimes a larger rock. And for those who refuse to pay attention, God resorts to a brick. "Africa," he said, "was my brick." Since that first trip in 1992, Brehm has traveled to Africa regularly taking groups, especially of business executives, getting to see and experience what he had discovered.

I said his name was Ward Brehm. But I believe his name is also Nicodemus, that upstanding Pharisee leader Jesus encounters in the 3rd chapter of John's Gospel. His career has gone well. He goes to synagogue, he prays regularly, probably has well-behaved children to boot. But for some reason he's restless enough with his life to slip out under cover of night to find this rabbi named Jesus.

It's by any standard a bizarre conversation. There's a lot of talk but not much communication. Nicodemus leads off with a little cozy familiarity: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God..." "We know..." You can almost hear the smug pretentiousness. After all, he's a ruler of the synagogue. You and I know the deal.

Everything is under control. And what are they supposed to “know?” Probably that God is nice and safe and not very interesting or creative. People are supposed to keep the rules, be responsible. Live a good life. That’s about it.

But Jesus blurts out, “You’ve got to be born from above, born anew,” which confuses Nicodemus completely. What does that mean? So Nicodemus tries to get a grip: “But how can anyone be born after having grown old? Can somebody go back into the mother’s womb and start over?” Our friend is a little literal-minded, you have to say.

And then Jesus just makes it worse when he says, “The wind blows where it chooses, you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going.” What kind of god is he talking about? Jesus uses two of the most uncontainable, uncontrollable phenomena, birth and wind, to talk about God. In both, something has to happen to you. We don’t get ourselves born; a birthing process does it to us. We don’t generate the wind; it drives us. Nicodemus can’t find God, or the kingdom of God, on his own. He has to start over, be born again. He can’t plan it, achieve it, or put it on his resume. It has to come “from above,” Jesus says, from beyond him.

This conversation was Nicodemus’ brick. God got his attention in a confusing exchange he would never forget. We aren’t told what happened to Nicodemus after his night meeting. Apparently nothing immediately. It must have taken some time for it all to sink in. But something shifted somewhere, because he turns up two more times in John’s Gospel. He’s in the Temple later when Jesus is accused by crowds demanding that he be arrested. One man stands up to defend him. His name is Nicodemus.

And at the very end, Jesus is dead, crucified, and there is Nicodemus right beside him. This time he isn’t there at night as a seeker, but as a disciple, helping to take Jesus’ body away, to give back a bit of dignity.

Whether it’s a pebble, a rock, or a brick, God wants to get through to us, but that’s not so easy when we are all so competent, goal-oriented, and efficient. It isn’t easy for God to get some time on our calendar, to get our full attention, to get us to take a chance on a deeper, different life. I believe that deep down most people would love to have God change their lives, but they either don’t expect it, or are afraid that if that started to happen it would ask too much of them.

When God throws a brick, anything can happen. The wind blows, the Spirit moves, people start getting born from above into whole new lives.

Nicodemus is a lot like us. We have faith, sometimes faith or at least church life, has been a part of our lives all along. We’ve always been spiritually curious, but we keep faith in its own sphere. This is understandable in our world today. After all, we mainline believers of Caledon find ourselves in a mix of peoples and faith backgrounds and people who claim no faith at all. The reality is, cultural norms push religion into the private sphere. We want to be tolerant and respect one another. Our brand of religion promotes self-restraint, tolerance, and personal morality. We support public morality and an engagement in social issues too, of course, but that message has been muffled by the declining size and marginalization of mainline Protestants.

Commenting on this reality, writer Deborah Kapp puts it this way. In and of itself, there is much to praise about a faith that thrives in the dark. It is genuine, heartfelt, personal, and often deep. The point is not that this hidden faith is somehow faulty---as far as it goes; the point is that it is too small. In this text Jesus suggests that Nicodemus's kind of faith is incomplete, even immature. He likens his midnight encounter with Nicodemus to a child still safe in its mother's womb. You are still gestating, Jesus implies. You must be born again, and declare this faith in the light of day.

These words, "born again" are sometimes used by some Christians like they are throwing a brick at us. You can't recall a time in your life you can point at and say, "that day I was born again." Well, then the implication is that you haven't arrived.

The minister serving the church that my father was a part of all his life, when I was in my teen years was the Rev. Maurice Boyd. There is not a lot I remember from his sermons. He was a minister that had it all-the Belfast Irish accent was still deep in his voice. After five years of service in Sarnia, he went to one of the largest congregations in the United Church of Canada, located in London, Ontario. Some people of the Sarnia congregation drove the hour to London to still be part of his congregation. He had a charisma that was captivating during his preaching, but for the life of me I only remember one small thing that he taught me-"born again"--"We are born again, each and every new day." That is the only learning he brought that I remember clearly to this day .

There is an opportunity for us. It comes about again and again, perhaps each and every morning or if you're like me, pondering things when you can't sleep, perhaps in the middle of the night. When God throws a brick, anything can happen. The wind blows, the Spirit moves, people start getting born from above into whole new lives.

Are we inclined to see those bricks? Perhaps we see them, but we are just so good at dodging them, it has become a habit. I studied the science of food at University a long time ago. They taught us how to safely process food-heat it, package it in cans or bottles or space age tetra paks so it can sit on the shelf for months. They taught us how to formulate ingredient lists, to sell products with air or water (which is pretty cheap) and then bind the water with chemical agents or flavour it artificially or add some sugar and put it in a pretty package that might cost more than the ingredients. But, did they teach us how to feed the world's starving peoples? Oh, there were a few lectures in the introductory courses. Something about the green revolution was mentioned-how we could feed more if more land was dedicated to vegetation and less to the production of red meat. But the research dollars for the university no longer flowed from the people who grew or processed vegetables. No, by that time we had pretty well sold out our fruit and vegetable industry. Yes, we did learn how to flavour soybeans to increase our protein intake with less red meat consumption, but you know how successful soy burgers were.

There are a number of challenges before us. Relations with indigenous peoples have come to a head resulting in protests. The Caronavirus has set the world on edge and delivered a mighty blow to the immediate economic future. Bricks are flying these days. God is vying for our attention in more ways than we can count. But those ways are not often the same as what the world would have us react to. The world asks us what it is

that we need? And the answer the world expects is that I need more. I need less taxes so I can buy more stuff, for me. For my family. For the people that I know. That is what the world offers. That is not what God offers-certainly not what being born again is about.

Have you noticed God tossing any pebbles your way lately? Or stones trying to get your attention? Maybe there is a brick coming at you right now. Our God is a restless God, a relentless God who pursues us. God wants to be born anew, to let the wind of the Spirit blow through us and fill our sails.

I don't know how God will get through to you: through a trip to a third world country where you witness-see and smell life in the slum and perhaps view from there the high rise deluxe hotels on the horizon, set up for us tourists to live the 'high' life, or a Pacific cruise that points out islands disappearing because the water is rising due to climate change; a seaside vacation where you see the effects of plastic thrown aside by those who have much; perhaps in a personal crisis that knocks you off your axis; through a conversation, a book, a friend, a sermon, a significant donation, a hymn, a workshop.

I do know that really to know God's love means letting go and making room and being ready to be born anew. Being born anew is being born with God at the center, which changes our behavior in significant ways. I know God desires us, and wants us to loosen our grip, open our hands and eyes, and go where God needs us to go.

Let us be born anew. Where is your Africa? Which brick will you catch? Amen.

Acknowledging Inspiration from:

Lloyd, Sam, 30 Good Minutes, November 23, 2008

Kapp, Deborah J., Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, p.68-72