

Genesis 12:1-4a ~ John 3:1-17

Seeking: How do we begin again?

Second Sunday in Lent ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion ~ March 5, 2023

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Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson:

How long have you lived in the home where you currently reside? Think how much you love settling into your favorite chair that has molded to the contours of your body. Or consider *your* pillow: the one which is not too hard, or too soft, not too thin, or too thick--but just the way you like it. Perhaps you even take your pillow with you when you travel by car for an overnight visit with friends or family.

Now imagine if you were told to go. To leave your pillow, your chair, your home, your hometown, your homies. Leave all that you know to go somewhere you don't know. Somewhere you've never been. Nor is the somewhere even specified. At this point in your life you are settled, secure. You sowed your wild oats long ago. Now, imagine you live in a culture where people do not move. Everybody stays put for generations unless a calamity forces you to flee.

Yes, I am inviting you to try to imagine what it might have been like for Abram when God told him in Genesis 12:1 to "Go" and in verse 4 we read, "So Abram went as the Lord had told him." Talk about spare narrative. If you think about it, this story raises a bunch of questions. Don't you wonder how Abram even knew that God was talking to him? And just how long was the gap between God's "Go, Abram, go" and when Abram actually went? Genesis does not answer these questions for us. Abram is silent in this story. God talks, Abram acts. The rest is up to us to wonder and ponder. And not just "us" who follow Christ: This hinge story launches all three great Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Our Gospel lesson today about Nicodemus is another story entirely. Or is it? Both Abram and Nicodemus are settled and then become unsettled by their encounter with the divine. Thanks to the writers of the Gospel we name John, we have a more detailed story than we have in Genesis about Abram. We know Nicodemus came to Jesus, seeking. And we know that he came to Jesus by night, literally and figuratively.

I like to call this story "Nic at Night" but realize that this phrase might make you think of the TV station, "Nickelodeon at Nite" and all those Friends episodes you like to watch again and again. Or "NIC at Night" might make some of you think of the boot camp military training called the "Night Infiltration Course." This "NIC at Night" is an obstacle course every recruit must pass in basic training. In the darkness of night, they are required to scale obstacles and climb under barbed wire with live rounds flying overhead. To *our* "Nic at night" Pharisee Nicodemus, not a raw recruit but actually well established in his career and understanding of the Torah, Jesus' response to his question may have seemed like a *spiritual* Night Infiltration Course. What Jesus told him was astonishing, unsettling, and surprising. That night, anyway.

As settled as you may feel in your understanding of this core text, I invite you to resist the temptation to stay where you are with this story. May the Spirit surprise and unsettle you in the reading of this sacred word, as it is written in John 3:1-17.

Communion Meditation:

"And I learned everything I needed to know from John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16." So go the lyrics to country and western singer Keith Urban's tribute to rural living. Yes, John 3:16 is perhaps the best-known Bible verse in the New Testament. Yet, even still, this popular verse is not universally recognized. Legend has it that former baseball player and broadcaster Tim McCarver was calling a New York Mets game and noticed a person holding a sign behind home plate that read simply, "John 3:16." Apparently McCarver said, "Look, Tommy John has lowered his E.R.A. (earned run average) again!"ⁱⁱ

Setting John 3:16 in the context of this multi-layered, metaphor rich story you just heard, could take an entire sermon and then some. But that's another sermon for another day. Or expanding the lens to see this story within the context of a gospel written at least sixty years after Jesus' crucifixion, by and for a Jewish Christian community that was being persecuted and condemned, could be another sermon. Like the Holy Spirit herself, this story is untamable and contains depths we have yet to discover. There is so much to keep seeking in this story.

I am choosing to let the question, "How do we begin again" lead the path I will take in this sermon. And it leads us right to the heart of the Christian faith: The call to being born anew again and again. Another word for this is transformation. To be transformed is not just being changed from one thing to another. To be transformed is to be changed into something you never were before. As author and biblical scholar Marcus Borg has written, "It is the process of internal redefinition of the self whereby a real person is born within us... In short, spirituality is about the process of being born again and again and again."ⁱⁱⁱ This is the heart of the Christian life. Kristina Kaiser's Forum for All today after worship will give us a chance to unpack this for us!!

I will warn you: it's wild stuff this Holy Spirit. As Jesus describes it to Nicodemus. Like the wind, the Spirit blows where she will. Unsettling, unpredictable. Given what Jesus said in John 3, you have to wonder how our understanding of this verse and of our whole faith too often has boiled down to such a narrow, predictable bastion of tradition? You'd think the last last seven words of Christ were actually: "We've never done it way this before."

Fear not, I am here to give you fresh hope, hopefully! Yes, hope for people of all ages. Starting with words from the 19th century American transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which I hear an eloquent, compelling description of what it means to be born anew: *"Thus there is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate and spring. Why should we import rage and relics into the new hour? Nature abhors the old, and old age seems the only disease; all others run into this one. We call it by many names—fever, intemperance, insanity, stupidity and crime; they are all forms of old age; they are rest, conservatism, appropriation, inertia; not newness, not the way onward. We grizzle every day. I see no need of it.*

"Whilst we converse with what is above us, we do not grow old, but grow young. Infancy, youth, receptive, aspiring, with religious eye looking upward, counts itself nothing and abandons itself to the instruction flowing from all sides. But the man and woman of seventy assume to know all, they have outlived their hope, they renounce aspiration, accept the actual for the necessary and talk down to the young. Let them become organs of the Holy Ghost; let them be lovers; let them behold truth; and their eyes are uplifted, their wrinkles smoothed; they are perfumed again with hope and power... People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them. Life is a series of surprises." ^{iv}

Perhaps you came here this morning seeking hope. Hope in something or someone or some situation that seems hopeless. Hope for our community, our nation, our world in the midst of politics and posturing that can crush and crumble our will to get up and go. For God so loved the world that God surprised Abram at seventy-five: "You are not done. You are just getting started." For God so loved the world, that Jesus astonished Nicodemus: "It's about the Spirit, the wild, untamable, unknowable Spirit of God that rebirths us again and again. And keeps growing us into the people and world Jesus came to save."

Here's the hope for us today: No matter how old or young we are; now matter how sure and settled our opinions may be, I hear God calling us to resist the urge to be done learning or growing. The answer to everything we need to know is right behind me. Yes, we need to know that we are never done. We can begin again and again and again through Christ and what he did. The cross is our sign of new life. Jesus died on the cross so we could begin again—not just once. We are not a "one and done" faith. Jesus died on the cross so we could start over anywhere, anytime we are willing to open ourselves to the life of the Spirit. Yes, to be vulnerable, to stay open. As individuals, as a church, as the world God so loved and still loves.

Can we be like Abraham? Or like Nicodemus? I think most of us are more like Nicodemus. We'd rather keep our defenses up, our guardrails firmly in place. As Father Richard Rohr teaches, "Did you ever imagine that what we call "vulnerability" might just be the key to ongoing growth?" Like Emerson, Richard Rohr also calls us to use every occasion to expand, change and grow. He wrote "to keep you growing is to keep you vulnerable to life and love itself... Spirit-led people never stop growing and changing and recognizing the new moment of opportunity." Or as Keith Urban's sings it, you can become, *"a child of a backseat freedom, baptized by rock and roll, Marilyn Monroe and the Garden of Eden, never grow up, never grow old, Just another rebel in the great wide open, on the boulevard of broken dreams."*

Friends, are you ready to "ungrizzle"? You have come to the right place at the right time. Here at this Table, Jesus invites us to bring our broken hearts and our broken hearts. Truly, our Savior teaches us: the road of pain and death is the boulevard that leads to resurrection. The boulevard of beginning again. And again. Let this Jesus feed your spirit at this Table and may we leave this meal perfumed with hope and power.

ⁱ The title and sermon themes for this series, *Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith*. A series created for Lent-Easter Year A, are from A Sanctified Art, LLC.

ⁱⁱ Mickeal C. Parsons, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 2* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2019), p. 55.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering A Life of Faith*, (Harper: San Francisco, CA, 2003), pp. 117, 120.

^{iv} Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," *The Harper American Literature, Volume One*, Second Edition, Harper: San Francisco, CA) p. 1178.

^v Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, (Whitaker House: New Kensington, PA, 2016), p.59.