

“God Loves the World”

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

My grandmother got married when she was in her late seventies. She wasn't looking to get married. She had been widowed for over 15 years and was living alone happily, with no desire to change. But then a good friend's wife died, and he proposed to her ... several times. She agonized over what to do. She had always felt attracted to this man, and she knew he needed someone in his life. But it would mean a big change for her. Besides adjusting to day to day life with a new person who had his own ideas and tastes, he had a winter home in Arizona and she would have to give up her cozy home and community in Vermont for half the year. But in the end she said yes. She decided she wasn't too old to change and took the risk. And they had four or five good years together before he died.

Tom read the story of God's call to Abraham this morning. Abraham was 75 years old when God told him to pack up and leave; leave his father's house, his country, and all his relatives, and go to a new land that God would show him. This was a permanent migration to new territory, where Abraham would start from the beginning, with only his wife Sarah, who had no children, his nephew Lot, and some servants. Abraham would probably never see his father, brother and other relatives again.

And notice that there was no precise destination. God simply said, "Go to the land that I will show you." There was no travel agenda, no map pointing out rest stops, no description of the accommodations waiting for him when he arrived, no guarantee of a welcoming committee. Abraham would have to find his own food and water, find his own place to set up a tent as he went, and face possible danger from the people he passed on the way. Still, God asked him to trust that where he was going would be a good place, and that he would find blessing there. God called Abraham to let go of life-as-he-knew-it, and trust God. And this is why Abraham is lifted up today as an example and the foundation of our faith, by Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. Abraham started a new life trusting in God's goodness. It was a long journey, full of adventure, sacrifice and hard work, but Abraham did find blessing and life.

This morning Pete read the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was also probably an old man. He was a respected leader in the Jewish community, and a Pharisee who treasured the law and the tradition of the elders. He was a cautious conservative, but with a mind of his own. According to John's gospel, Jesus went to Jerusalem at the very beginning of his ministry, and disrupted business in the Temple, driving out the money-changers, and accusing them of turning God's house into a marketplace. The Pharisees at this point didn't know what to think of Jesus, but they must have heard the stories of miracles and healings. What was Jesus trying to do?

Instead of jumping to conclusions, Nicodemus went to Jesus to hear what he had to say about himself. He said, "Rabbi (or teacher), we know that you ... (have) come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." But when Jesus replied, he didn't talk about himself and what Nicodemus should think about him. Instead he turned the conversation back to Nicodemus and what he wanted

out of life. He told Nicodemus, if you really want to see the Kingdom of God, you have to be born from above, or born again.

This was not exactly an answer to any question Nicodemus had asked. But in the gospel of John at least, Jesus rarely answered the questions people were asking. Instead, he answered the questions people *should be* asking. The important question is not whether Jesus is from God. If you understand God and get to know Jesus, then you will figure that out. The real question is, how do you relate to God yourself? How do you experience God's presence and spirit? Is your life of faith simply about keeping laws and trying to be good? Or is there more to it than that?

Today "born again" is one of those "hot button" phrases that get people all excited or upset. Some Christians believe that if you can't say you're "born again," then you're not a real Christian. But others feel that insisting on a particular kind of experience limits God. After all, Jesus only said, "You must be born again," to one person in the Bible. That would be Nicodemus.

Jesus approached different people with different challenges, depending on who they were and what they needed. He told a rich man, "You lack one thing. Go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Mk. 10:21) Others, Jesus simply laid his hands on and healed them, and they rose up with new eyes and a new life. He did say to Nicodemus, "You must be born again, (or born from above.)" But that was not meant to be a prescription or formula to be applied to everyone. Still, it was a challenge for Nicodemus to change the way he understood God and life. And many of us need that kind of challenge.

When Nicodemus heard these words he took them literally and became defensive. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" It's almost as if he was saying, "Listen Jesus, I'm an old man. I have already chosen a path for my life. I can't start over."

When Jesus tried to explain, telling him the mystery of wind and spirit, Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" At that point Jesus lost his patience, frustrated with the blindness of conventional religion. He answered, "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Like many other Pharisees, Nicodemus was attached to his traditions and laws and he believed that he was on the right path. After all, the Pharisees had the highest moral standards of anyone at that time. They were concerned with how to live a godly life on earth; what is proper to eat, when we should rest, how we should treat servants and neighbors, how we should deal with disease, how we should regulate our sexual behavior, what obligation do we have to share our possessions. These are all important things to work out. How we behave on this earth matters. But according to Jesus, these questions are not what salvation is about.

Salvation does not come by making ourselves good. Jesus told Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit." If we want to see and be part of God's reign, we have to let go of our earthly struggles, and begin again, be transformed, be born from above. And this is not something we achieve through hard work. It is the free gift of God received with faith.

Sometimes church people think too much like the Pharisees. Last week Karen Peters posted a link on our church's Facebook page. It was a blog post by a pastor who

visited some Sunday worship services in his city, wearing earrings, baggy pants, with his hat on backwards and pretending he didn't know much about how church worked. He did this because he had talked with some people outside of church who told him they were sure they would not be welcome inside a church. These were people from rough backgrounds, and they looked the part. So the pastor decided to dress like one of them and see what would happen if he walked into a church service like that.

Sure enough it was true. In almost every single church he visited, no one greeted him. Instead they stared at him, and in one church someone tapped him on the shoulder and told him to take his hat off. He didn't get the idea that anyone cared about who he was inside. What he got was suspicion and judgment. And we wonder why churches are dying.

But according to Jesus, God's spirit blows where it wills. God does not just love the people who follow the rules and fit in, who know what to say and how to dress for church. God loves the world. That would be the whole world, and everyone in it. And God's spirit blows on all sorts of people, breathing into them new life, regardless of what they look like, or what path their life has taken. Anyone who comes to God with an open heart, anyone who is willing to say yes to God and start on a new life adventure, is welcome.

Today we are giving out copies of the book "Practicing Our Faith." I am thrilled that forty three of you have signed up to read it during Lent. The book devotes one chapter each to one of twelve practices of faith. And I am hoping that by reflecting on these practices and discussing them with others, we will discover new adventures in faith. We don't observe practices to make ourselves good, or to earn salvation. But they can help us be more open to God and more fully alive to God's spirit and God's call in our lives.

Take for example, the practice of observing the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not meant to be an obligation or time of negative rules and restrictions: you have to go to church, and you can't do this or that. The point is to carve out time in our busy week to rest and be with God and God's people. The Sabbath is a precious "piece of time that opens space for God." (p. 81). Keeping Sabbath is supposed to restore our souls and lead us more fully into life. And when we neglect to observe it, we miss out on life.

Likewise hospitality is not about showing off homes or preparing lavish food. We may welcome people into our home or offer them food. But hospitality is much more than that. It's seeing and welcoming God's presence in other people. When some of you hosted the Children of Uganda this winter, it was a challenge and an adventure, but also a great gift. Don't you feel more alive and more full of love and closer to God as a result of providing hospitality?

Today we gather at the table of our Lord. At this table we affirm that God loves the world and everyone in it. God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, but that through him we might find life. At this table, Jesus offer his life to us and calls us to offer our lives to God. It's a challenge, an adventure of faith, and an assurance that God is calling us to a good place, full of life. You're never too old or too young to be born from above, to see the world through God's eyes, and say yes to God's life-giving spirit. Amen.