

2 Lent

March 12, 2017

St. Luke's

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17

There's a consistent theme in the readings this morning and that's the theme of journey. Abraham's journey is both physical – God tells him to get up and go from his country to a land that God will show him – and spiritual, because to go on that journey he has to trust in God and let go of everything that stands in the way of obeying God's call. He's being asked to do something radically NEW and to do that, he has to move beyond tradition, the way he and his family and tribe have always done things, and beyond comfort and even beyond safety. Paul sees Abraham as the model of faith for all of us, seeing faith, not as BELIEVING in things, but rather as the way of life that we can live if we develop a relationship of trust in God. And in the Gospel, Nicodemus is making a journey, too, although his is not so much physical as theological and spiritual. And the psalm tells us that in all these journeys, one thing is for sure: that God is watching over us – he's never inattentive, he watches day and night, he watches over our coming in and our going out.

Let's look more closely at these texts.

In the first reading we're only in Chapter 12 of Genesis. And if there's a message in the preceding 11 chapters, it surely is that when the humans are left to their own devices, things fall apart. Last week we heard about Adam and Eve and disobedience and banishment; following that, still in the first family, there's the story of fratricide; before long, the problems are universal and become so bad that God sends the flood in an attempt to just start over. But things don't get much better and, just before this morning's reading, there's the story of the Tower of Babel. I think it's safe to say that the message of these early chapters is that humanity, trying to do without God, comes to a dead end. That's exemplified by that Tower that goes nowhere and in the barrenness of Abram and Sarah. So in his call to Abraham, God is trying once again, He's doing something new, He's taking one man, and asking that man to trust Him enough to do something new; He's asking him to leave the old stuff behind – the conventional thinking, the old gods, his comfortable way of doing things, his security. TRUST ME, God says, trust me enough to leave all that behind and I will show you a new land, I'll make you a great nation, I will bless you and through you, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

The physical journey to the promised land was real enough but the other journey, the one about leaving the old stuff behind, and enlarging your vision of God and of yourself and of what you're called to be about – that journey is one we are all on.

Look for a minute at the Nicodemus story. Nicodemus has a life that looks like it's all together – he's a learned man, a respected Rabbi, a Jewish leader, and yet, and yet...he sees something in Jesus that he knows he doesn't have. He calls Jesus "Rabbi," and he knows that the signs that Jesus has done show that he comes from God. But he also knows that Jesus isn't "respectable," Jesus isn't conventional, he isn't accepted by the powers that be. Jesus is breaking all kinds of barriers that the orthodox Jews held dear – he, too, is asking people to do something new. In his case, he asking them to go beyond the barriers set up to keep people out – whether barriers of ritual, or law, or family or tribe or nation. So, Nicodemus is driven by his curiosity about Jesus, but he's

also still cautious. He doesn't want to jeopardize his standing in the Jewish community. So, he comes to Jesus, but he comes at night.

In their conversation, Jesus tells him that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Sometimes this is translated as "born again" or "born anew." Nicodemus misses the point completely by taking the statement literally – he's thinking biology – WHAT? How in the world am I supposed to do that? But Jesus is talking spirituality: you need to be born anew, you need to see with new eyes, you need to re-orient yourself, to get a new understanding of what's going on. To put it in the words we used in talking about Abraham, you need to leave the old, narrow, confined way of thinking about things behind and move into a whole new way of life. To put in another way, you need to WAKE UP.

What does this say about us? I think it says, first of all that we're probably more like Nicodemus than like Abraham. We are kind of in that middle place – we really want a more trusting relationship with God, we really want an encounter with Him, we want to live more enlightened, loving lives, BUT at the same time we want to hang on to the places and things and people that we know – we want to stay where we feel secure and comfortable. And we fail to recognize that to do so is to refuse the new and more abundant life that's always being offered to us.

As always, these scriptures are about us. They're asking us, first of all, to remember that we're on a journey. Some years ago I saw a poster that said that life was about the journey, not about the destination. And, just recently I saw a cartoon in which a couple was telling the ticket agent at the airline counter that as far as THEY were concerned, it was about the journey, but as far as their luggage was concerned, it was about the destination. What the scriptures are telling us is that, for us, it's about both. It's about the final destination, that final coming home to God for which we were created. Remember Augustine's saying that our hearts would be restless until they rested in God? Nothing else, finally, not wealth or success or prestige, or fame will fill that God-sized hole that we all have in our hearts. But it's also about HOW we get there. It would be lovely, wouldn't it, to have a kind of spiritual GPS system that would tell us when we've made a wrong turn or are headed in the wrong direction, or are about to miss some God-given opportunity for growth. You know, like "U-TURN at the next available spot, Recalibrating, recalibrating...!"

But we actually have something even better – we have Christ as our model, this Jesus who said to his disciples, I AM THE WAY AND THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE. I am the way. Follow me and you won't need any other GPS. What does that mean in terms of our daily lives in this context of journey? It means following someone whose life was about teaching and healing and forgiveness, about love and compassion and service. It was a life in which the central teaching was about the Kingdom of God and, by living in it, making it a reality. It's about living out of the knowledge that each person we meet is a son or daughter of God, made in God's image and infinitely precious.

But to be a Christian is also to have inherited the richness of the Hebrew Scriptures. And because of that we know that we, like Abraham, are asked to live in a way that we become a blessing to those around us. Maybe a good meditation for this second week of Lent is to spend some time thinking about what a life that brings blessings to others would look like. I have a couple of examples. Maybe it looks like those Muslims who helped clean up and pay for repairs to a desecrated Jewish cemetery.

Or maybe it looks like the woman Mother Theresa told about - she had brought a bag of rice to a woman whose family was starving. When Mother Theresa gave her the rice, she immediately divided it in half and said, "Please wait while I take this my neighbor; her children are hungry too."

I think most of us saw the movie "The Other Son" which was about two boys who discover, when they are 18, that they were switched at birth. That's probably traumatic enough, but the story takes place in Israel and the boy who thought he was Jewish was really a Palestinian Arab and the Arab boy was really Jewish. Those boys and their families had to take emotional journeys across years of hatred, across tribal membership. At one point, the Jewish boy goes to visit his Arab family and his Jewish father makes the journey to the occupied territory to retrieve him. He journeys on foot because it's too dangerous to drive into the territories. He's seen walking alongside the fence separating the two peoples and that fence is a perfect metaphor for the journey of reconciliation that still needs to be made. It's a dangerous journey for him, but the point is made that he'll do whatever is necessary for the love of this boy who is his son, whether biologically or not.

Perhaps as we continue in Lent, we can give some thought to the ways God is inviting us into something new, into more abundant life, into greater understanding, into ways of life that welcome those God places before us, whether friends or strangers. In these days of partisanship and situations in which families and friends are breaking apart over political stances, perhaps one necessary journey is to empathy and understanding. And perhaps the challenge is to hear God telling us that the purpose of OUR blessings is that we will become a blessing to others. Amen.