

Genesis 12:1-4a

¹Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” ⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Psalm 121

¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills —
from where will my help come?
² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
⁴ He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
⁶The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The 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.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Winds of Change

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There is a song from an obscure little musical called *110 in the Shade* and the song begins with a lyric that goes like this: “*Everything beautiful happens at night, happens at night, happens at night. Everything beautiful happens after the sun goes down.*” It is of course a song that might make you think of your first love, or first date, or even your first kiss, but it was a tune that sort of popped into my mind as I was reading and thinking about our gospel reading this morning. It got me thinking about some of the important events that have occurred in my life at night, and one of them was that my daughters were both born in the middle of the night or in the wee dark hours of the morning. Maybe your children were born at night too? Being born seems to be something you can’t really schedule unless you are having a C-section. And I’ve been told by most mothers that children arrive when they are ready.

Those of you who raise cattle or horses have told me about foals and calves that often arrive in the middle of the night. We don’t really know why, but they seem to arrive when you least expect it and usually when you would rather be sleeping. Being born is something that happens on a different schedule than the one we plan and we usually don’t get to decide when to be born.

I also remember a night when I came to the Baptist church of my youth and through the stillness and whispers of the Holy Spirit, finally let go of my rigid resistance, and opened my heart to God, and experienced what Jesus speaks of, about being born anew, or born from above. Perhaps you’ve had moments like that in your life? Quiet and powerful moments when you heard and felt the moving of the Holy in your life, and something new began to grow in your heart and spirit?

My favorite story about this is from Fredrick Buechner who shared a story about when he was living in New York as a young writer and he started going to church. He says it was primarily because he didn’t have anything better to do and the church was right on the block where he lived and he was quite honestly, lonely. He says: “The preacher was a man named George Buttrick, and Sunday after Sunday I went, and sermon after sermon I heard. It was not just his eloquence that kept me coming back, though he was wonderfully eloquent, literate, imaginative, never letting you guess what he was going to come out with next but twitching with surprises up there in the pulpit, his spectacles a-glitter in the lectern light. What drew me more was whatever it was that his sermon came from and whatever it was in me that they touched so deeply.

And then there came one particular sermon with one particular phrase in it that does not even appear in a transcript of his words that somebody sent me more than twenty five years later so I can only assume that he must have dreamed it up at the last minute and ad-libbed it—and on just such foolish, tenuous, holy threads as that, I suppose, hang the destinies of us all. “Jesus Christ refused the crown that Satan offered him in the wilderness, Buttrick said, but he is king nonetheless because again and again he is crowned in the hearts of the people who believe in him. And that inward coronation takes place, Buttrick said, “among confession, and tears and great laughter.”

It was the phrase great laughter that did it, did whatever it was that I believe must have been hiddenly in the doing all the years of my journey up till then. It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along which I had only just then stumbled upon. After church with a great lump still in my throat, I walked up to 84th street to have Sunday dinner with Grandma Buechner. She sat in her usual chair with the little Philco silent at her side and a glass of sherry in her hand, and when I told her something of what had happened, I could see that she was as much bemused as pleased by what I had said. I have forgotten her words,

but the sense of her answer was that she was happy for me that I had found whatever it was that I had found. “*Le bon Dieu.*” (Our Good God) You could never be sure what he was up to. Who could say?”

I couldn't help but wonder if this was what was happening with Nicodemus as well in our story this morning. At night things seem to quiet down a bit and while there are those who suggest that he came to Jesus by night to avoid being seen or recognized, I wonder if it wasn't more about the time of day. A time of day when things are still and quiet and the Spirit begins to speak to you. I know this is true for me as I study and think about what I'm preaching on each week. There are times in the evenings or the dark of early mornings when I need to hear more, to see more, to understand more fully, and it drives me to find Jesus and ask some questions. There are even times when I wake up in the middle of the night with ideas and stories about a text that seem to come from my dreams. And then of course, I have to get up and write them down before they disappear into the night.

Maybe this was true for Nicodemus as well. He was a learned and spiritually wise leader, a Pharisee and not one without power and authority. He was one who made it his life's purpose and mission to keep the law and help others to do the same. It was his ticket to being acceptable to God and his appearance in this story may highlight again the difference between keeping the law and experiencing God's grace and mercy in the life of Jesus. It may be, that after seeing what Jesus had been doing and the signs that he had given, that Nicodemus knows that there is something incredible about this man Jesus, and that he is from God, and he wants to know more. Perhaps he heard a word that opened a door to his heart and he is hungry for more than the law and so he comes to Jesus by night. Maybe like Abram, he is ready for a new journey, a journey of the Spirit.

Kathryn Matthews Huey in her commentary this week shared this. She says: “I'd like to say a word in defense of Nicodemus. Throughout the Gospels, we read about people who came to Jesus in great need. Sometimes they needed to be healed, sometimes they needed to be fed (remember those loaves and fishes on the hillside?), and sometimes they needed to be forgiven, or even just accepted. Their defenses were down, and most but not all of them were outsiders, powerless and uneducated, with nothing to lose if they admit how hungry they were for God. I believe that Nicodemus was hungry, too. His hunger may not show so easily; he may have been afraid to admit that he was spiritually hungry, but his questions reveal the deep longing he had for the truth that is life, his hunger for new life.”

Friday, we had a wild and windy day, with wind gusts up to 60 miles an hour. You couldn't tell which way the wind was blowing. One minute it was pounding the front of the house and next it was circling around to the back. We were sitting at home being thankful for every hurricane tie we put on those rafters. I was watching a hemlock tree in our backyard and the branches were going every which way all at the same time. I was waiting for limbs to start snapping off which is always a danger when the wind blows here in the mountains.

The wind is unpredictable and while the weather channel thinks it knows where the wind may blow, I'm not convinced. And this is true of the Holy Spirit too. It doesn't follow any rules or any map. As Jesus told Nicodemus, and us as well, “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.”

Change is difficult for many of us, isn't it? We like things to stay the way they are and we want everyone to follow the rules. And some are not willing to acknowledge that the Spirit is in control, speaking and moving the hearts of people we might be uncomfortable with, quite honestly. But the good news is that you don't get to decide that. The Spirit moves where she will and you are invited along for the ride if you are willing!

I like to think that Nicodemus was going to struggle with that a little bit. That he was going to consider that maybe the old ways of doing and understanding the religious life were not giving him or others the fullness of relationship they needed. That they needed a newness of spirit that only comes by allowing the spirit to move in your heart and not by obeying all the rules that had governed their lives for so long. “New wine skins for new wine” is what Jesus said at the wedding just before this.

Maybe it was time to let down his resistance to Jesus’ call to be born anew and to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. To be like Abram in our reading this morning and hear God’s voice, trusting in the promise and go forward. To know as the psalmist that “God is for us, not against us; that He will not let your foot stumble”, and move forward with Jesus’ words in your ears that “he has not come to condemn the world, but to save it.”

We are just about to be done with winter thank goodness. And we look with anticipation for this spring season where the earth after a long winter is ready to burst forth into blossom. And I hope you will use this as a metaphor for thinking about what is happening here in the church as well. Maybe it is time for both Newdale and Grassy Creek churches to let the Spirit lead? To listen to the windy call of the Holy Spirit and perhaps not worry about what has always been done before, but open our hearts to a renewal of vision as we walk in this darkness of Lent toward the light of Christ.

And so, I have to ask myself, ‘Being children of God, how are we listening to the Spirit to move forward in the world? What are you hungry for within the kingdom of God here in this community? What visions are you having? As the grass and flowers begin to grow what is growing inside of you, of us, of the church? How are you getting ready to come alive again and become what God is calling you, us, and the church to be? How can the season of Lent become a time of growth and nurture, just as if you were back in the womb of creation?’

All our readings today are about journeys. Journeys of distance and journeys of the soul. And I believe that Nicodemus was being called and led toward Jesus just as you and I have been led by the urging of the Spirit, into this journey of new life. And remember that Nicodemus shows up again at the end of this journey as he defended Jesus against his peers and helped bury him after his death. So, I think we can be sure he left this encounter a changed person.

So, what about you? What’s your story today? Are you ready to let the Spirit loose and be born again in this season of Lent? Are you ready to listen to that creative wind of God as it moves over the waters of your hearts and speaks to you to do something new and different? Are you ready to move confidently into the future, moving toward the Light knowing as the psalmist did that “God will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore?” Do you have some doubts? Good! Does it make you a little nervous? That’s good too. Do we know where we are going? Probably not, and that’s alright! The Spirit moves where it will and we don’t have any control over that. And as Buechner’s Grandmother reminds us, “*Le bon Dieu*, Our Great God. O, you can never be sure what God is up to. Who could say?” So, buckle up and join me for the ride! Let us pray.

Born Yet Again
(inspired by John 3:1-17)

Why do we settle, O God, for only being born once, or even twice,
as if the world never changes,
as if everything is just fine the way it is
and we have no need for new life,
new encounters with you,
new promptings of your Spirit,
and new awakenings in our souls?

Why do we turn your invitation into a mark of our own achievement,
as if your life is anything other than an extravagant gift,
as if the glimpses of your reign that we receive
are earned,
or deserved,
or make us somehow 'better' than others?

We praise you for the shocking miraculous truth, God,
that we can always be - that we need to always be
born again;
that daily you welcome us into a surprising new life,
the wonderful, creative, unpredictable world of your Spirit;
and that all we can do is allow ourselves to be pushed -
birthed, by your grace,
into new experiences of your reign.

Here we are, O God;
Let us be, once more,
in this moment, in this place,
Born yet again.

Amen.

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