

Second Sunday in Lent
Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121, John 3:1-17
David H. Teschner
March 16, 2014

“So Abram went...” and “He (Nicodemus) came...” In these short sentence fragments lay much of the substance of today’s readings from both testaments.

Abram, later to be called Abraham, is considered the Father of the Jewish faith. What we know about him before now is that he married a woman named Sarai, who was barren, and Abram’s father is a man named Terah. Terah had moved the family from a place called Ur to Haran, in present day Iran, where they had settled and prospered. Abram then takes center stage in Jewish history in the short reading we heard from Genesis 12. His story is the beginning of the story of the Jewish people.

We heard the Lord command Abram to go from his present country, and give him a list of incredible promises about his future. “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.” Abram gives the Lord absolute obedience. Without question or hesitation, he packs up his family and their belongings and hits the road for destinations to be determined later. He’ll, of course, end up in Canaan, which becomes the Jewish promise land or home land. He and Sarai will have one son in their old age, and when the Lord tests Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his only son and heir, he again doesn’t question or hesitate. Abram is a company man, a true-blue soldier in the Lord’s army. How else could he be the one to start a new people – the chosen of God?

Hundreds of years later, Nicodemus is a descendant of Abraham and a loyal, true-blue adherent of the Jewish faith. We are told he is a Pharisee and leader of the Jews. His training and dedication to the Jewish Law has elevated him to the top. He is a member of the 70 or Great Sanhedrin, which assembled regularly in Jerusalem to legislate on all matters of Jewish religious and political life.

Shortly before Nicodemus came to see Jesus, Jesus had caused a major commotion in the Temple by driving out animals sold for sacrifice and turning

over the tables of the money changers. This had gotten the attention of the Sanhedrin, and many questioned whether Jesus was a prophet or a hellion. Nicodemus came to Jesus to find out for himself.

Unlike most Pharisees and Jewish leaders Jesus encounters, Nicodemus is respectful and humble. He has seen in Jesus something that is drawing him to find out more. His coming at night is cautionary, but at least he is putting forth the effort to gain further insight.

Fortunately or unfortunately, he goes home more confused than when he arrived with all Jesus' talk about needing to be born from above and born of the Spirit. Nicodemus' entire religious upbringing, education and practice have not allowed him to comprehend any of the concepts Jesus speaks of. All he knew was that God required one to follow the Jewish Law with all one's heart, mind and strength. This is what was pleasing to the Lord.

It's a wonder we ever hear from Nicodemus again, yet we do, amazingly, not once but twice. A while later when the Jewish leadership is discrediting the upstart Galilean, Nicodemus speaks up for Jesus' right to be heard from before being condemned. Nicodemus gets a stern reproach, accused of being a Galilean himself. (John 7:50-52) And, after Jesus has been crucified, and it seemed that Jesus' cause was completely lost, Nicodemus is there to help bury him providing a hundred pounds of perfumes to anoint the body.(John 19: 39-40)

Nicodemus turns out to be a loyal advocate and admirer of Jesus to the very end. He is a standout example of a disciple. Even though he lacked adequate knowledge or understanding of who Jesus was and all that he was about, he still hung around. Jesus presented him with ideas that were beyond his capacity to imagine, and he still strained and stumbled forward rather than retreating back to his more traditional, comfortable and predictable beliefs and practices. We might say he rode the wind. He allowed it to blow him to new places of the heart and mind.

Abram had previously left his home and kindred to follow an unknown path in response to God's call. Nicodemus left his previous faith and leadership positions to follow Jesus' invitation to live by the Spirit.

Life in the Spirit can be a bit daunting because we can't fully control it any more than we can control the wind. God's Spirit may want to blow us from our comfort zones and previously held beliefs. Life in the Spirit has to be received. We can't dictate the outcomes. It's an adventure for the open-minded and open-hearted – a trust ride.

Psychiatrist and writer Robert Coles interviewed a man in 1965 who had come to oppose segregation. He seems a bit like Nicodemus, perhaps. What do you think? He said: "I don't know why I put myself on the line. I don't know why I said no to segregation. I am just another white Southerner, and I wasn't brought up to love integration. But I was brought up to love Jesus, and when I saw the police of this city use dogs on people, I asked myself what Jesus Christ would have thought, and what He would have done – and that's all I know about how I came to be here, on the firing line."

When Christian writer Esther de Waal visited Japan, she came to appreciate the people's practice of taking off their shoes before crossing the threshold to the interior of the home. Once inside they put on slippers. This allows them to distinguish between two spaces and stop ever so briefly to show respect for each. It's not unlike a practice some Episcopalians follow of pausing for a moment, maybe with a slight bow to the altar before entering or leaving the pew in worship. Both church and world are sacred spaces. We come to this sacred space for instruction by the Spirit and sustenance from the Spirit, so we can go forward into the world to better identify the Spirit in other people and all creation.

All the Lenten disciplines – self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial and reading and meditating on God's holy Word – are intended to better open us to the Spirit's movement.

Abram went. Nicodemus came. May you and I be touched regularly by God's Spirit and won over again and again by love. AMEN.

