

February 17, 2008 - Lent 2A

Genesis 12:1-2,3b-4a

Now God said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your parent’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great people, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went,

John 3:1-17

Now 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 kin-dom 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 kin-dom 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.”⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus 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.”¹² “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”¹³ “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Human One.”¹⁴ “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Child, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send this Child into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Let us pray...

God of amazing compassion, lover of all creation, including our wayward species, you bring to birth a pilgrim people, and call us to be a blessing for ourselves and all the world. We pray for grace to accept your generous gift and step with courage on this holy path, confident in the radiant life of shalom that is your plan for us. We give you thanks for Jesus who illuminates a Way on this holy path by which we may step out with courage as a pilgrim people.

Compassionate and Loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in thy sight. Amen.

Faithfully Stepping out

The story of Abram and Sarah is a foundational story of the great risk taking when one faithfully steps out in response to God.

To risk looking for a path towards the divine. To risk taking the first step on the path. To risk taking the next step. To risk stopping and questioning if you are on the correct path. To risk turning and making a correction in course. To risk taking the next step.

Our journey of faith begins when we realize that we are part of something greater than ourselves and deepens as we become aware that we are connected to all of creation – that we are in relationship with all of the cosmos – that we are in relationship with the divine, with God.

For some of us the journey of faith began with a sudden and dramatic event that happened in adolescences or later as adults. For many of us it was not a single intense experience, but a gradual and incremental process.

Dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity, dying to an old way of being and living into a new way of being, is a process that continues through a lifetime. As the life of faith matures it becomes more deeply centered in the Spirit, in the Divine, in God.

The re-birth metaphor, the metaphor of being Born again or being born from above applies to not only to a single dramatic event or the intense periods of major transition in our lives, but also this life long process of the journey of faith.

My experience is that I cannot make or force this process of being born again happen, but I can be intentional about creating the environment in which it may happen. My friend Barb Havens, who is a midwife, has helped teach me that Spirituality is midwifery.

The purpose of spirituality is to help birth the new self and nourish the new life.

Spirituality combines, awareness, intention and practice.

Marcus Borg defines Spirituality as becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God.

In this Borg affirms that we are born all ready in relationship to God, that is, God **is** in relationship with us and spirituality is about becoming aware of a relationship that already exists.

Once we are aware of the relationship with the Divine we must becoming intentional about our relationship. Spirituality is about paying attention to the relationship. Though the Divine is “Mystery”, there is nothing mysterious about paying attention to our relationship with God. We do so in the ways we pay attention to a healthy

human relationship: by spending time in it, attending to it, being thoughtful about it.

We pay attention to our relationship with God through practice, both as individuals and in community.

Lent is a time in which we pay particular attention to our practices of attending to our relationship with God.

Lent is a time in which we use our spiritual practices and risk stopping and questioning if you are on the correct path. It is a time to risk re-pent-ing - turning - and making a correction in course so that we can risk taking the next step on the Way toward God and the Kingdom of God.

Sisters and Brothers deepening our relationship with God as we follow the Way of Jesus is **not** about believing a set of ideas or doctrines or intellectual concepts. Rather, it is about a deepening relationship with the very ground of our being – that in which we live and move and have our being.

Spirituality is about the process of being born again (and again and again....)

This process can be particularly difficult for educated folks of privilege. Folks like Nicodemus.

Folks like us?

One does not have to be anti-intellectual to understand the limitations of academic training and to see the damage the some folks with that training have done as well as the damage that some academic institutions have done.

In a tradition that has placed an extremely high value on an educated clergy and laity, in is imperative that we recognize its limitations.

Education is most often inseparable from the systems of power and domination. It is created to serve the status quo and throughout history has faithfully done so very well. Education is the process through which the powers and principalities train their most important and trusted servants.

It is the process in a capitalist system in which the bourgeois trains the peti-bourgeois, the bureaucrats and technocrats to carry our their agenda of concentrating wealth.

Anyone who has received the privilege of education and has become aware that we are part of something greater than ourselves must decide: Will they serve the whole, the Holy, the common good, the project of life OR will they serve the idol Mammon, wealth and power, the project of death.

With education we also get all kinds of intellectual tricks and tools to obscure this fundamental decision of faithfulness. We can convince ourselves that we really

don't have to choose or that we still need more information before we can make the correct informed choice.

Nicodemus is not unusual. In fact he is the norm.

We need community to help us understand and face these difficult choices and decisions.

My grandmother, Jenny, (for whom, my daughter is named) met my grandfather, Alfred, at Jamestown College in North Dakota. They both came from peasant families that had never had formal education. There were seven children between their two families and all seven finished college and three went on to get Phd's.

My grandmother Jenny sat me down and said, "Danny, our family is now a part of the peti-bourgeois and you must decide. We do not have our own historic project. You can either serve the people or you can serve wealth, so cannot do both."

Yet, like Nicodemus, we can know that the Way of Jesus can lead to God but not have the courage and faith to risk taking the next step and follow.

The Gospel of John is quite remarkable in recognizing the complexity and ambiguity in the relationship of Nicodemus to Jesus and the Kin-dom of God movement.

Nicodemus appears in two other occasions in John's Gospel: In chapter 7 Nicodemus raises the question with the Chief priests and Pharisees of giving Jesus a fair hearing before he is judged and condemned. Then again

in Chapter 19 after Jesus' execution Nicodemus brings a huge and extremely expensive amount of spices to be rapped in his burial shroud.

John never says clearly whether or not Nicodemus is a follower of Jesus. Most orthodox and traditional commentators claim Nicodemus as a Pharisee who was converted to Jesus in the end because he defended his right to a fair trail and that he brought spices for his burial. But other commentators say NO, while Nicodemus did recognize who Jesus was, but he did not follow, much the same way that the Rich Ruler in the Synoptic Gospels recognizes that Jesus is offering a Way to journey towards God, but cannot or does not take the risk to follow.

I resonate with the complicated ambiguity in which John casts the character Nicodemus. None of us knows exactly how to read Nicodemus's lines, and which tone of voice to use. Is Nicodemus argumentative or sincerely questioning? Is he in awe of Jesus and drawn to him, or just flattering him in order to find a weakness, somewhere, anywhere, in his teachings? Do the answers from Jesus anger him, or perplex him, or lead him to new life?

Was the bringing the spices to the burial preparation an act of cynical realism? Jesus did show a way to journey towards God, but it was folly, a failure. Or did it represent that a dramatic step of faith and new life for Nicodemus as a follower of the Way of Jesus?

We don't know because Nicodemus is never mentioned again in the Gospel. We don't know if Nicodemus had a

resurrection experience and became a part of the on-going Kin-dom of God movement.

We are at a critical moment in our nations history in which we are choosing between cynical realism and risking being faithful to the best in our democratic experiment and choosing to organize our society around compassion and love or to continue down the path of fear and violence and death.

We as individuals and as a community of faith must decided how we can make the faithful choice and make the faithful next step so that we can be a light to our sisters and brothers so that they can see that it is possible to make a faithful choice as a people.

WE are in the midst of our Lenten journey using our spiritual practices and risk stopping and questioning if you are on the correct path. Will we be able to risk re-penting - turning -and making a correction in course ? Will we risk taking the next step?

May it be so.

Amen