

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, March 12, 2017

Genesis 12:1-4a

Now 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. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I 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." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "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."

Let us pray...Amen.

The contrast between our Hebrew Scripture and our Gospel Lesson couldn't be more stark: Abram's response to God's call was to immediately obey. And, we know from other stories, that Abram, or Abraham, obeyed God's call time and time again throughout his long life. He was ready to sacrifice his son for God, if that's what it was going to take to be obedient.

Nicodemus, on the other hand, has a few questions! Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a church leader, and, he was taking a great risk going to Jesus to ask questions. It would not have been good for him to be seen with Jesus, but something compelled him to go and speak with him.

Other stories about Nicodemus have him defending Jesus after he is arrested, pointing out that Jesus should have a fair trial, and finally, Nicodemus shows up after Jesus has died to help with his burial.

Both faith responses, absolute obedience, and healthy skepticism are represented many times in the bible, and in real life.

At one time or another, we've all received a call from God. We may not have heard it, it may have been a still, small voice, or it may have been a

booming commandment. But as God's children, God calls us to live faithful lives, to love our neighbors, even love our enemies.

Looking inside ourselves for a moment, how have we responded to God's call? More like Abraham, or more like Nicodemus? I'd hazard a guess that the majority of us are more like Nicodemus! Drawn to God and to Jesus, but needing some logical answers before we commit.

I believe very strongly that while there is an obvious difference between Abraham and Nicodemus in their responses, both are acceptable to God. Of course, God would appreciate all of us acting as quickly and as faithfully as Abraham, but I also believe that God patiently tolerates our questions. God is a big enough God to handle any question we could come up with!

Jesus wasn't afraid of Nicodemus and his questions, he wasn't even annoyed. Given enough time, the Nicodemus in all of us will come to the conclusion that obedience to God and God's son is the way to go. Nicodemus had heard enough from Jesus to take a public stand after Jesus was arrested, and he was strong enough in his faith to publicly assist with our Savior's burial.

Given that Lent is a journey, the challenge I have for you today is this: I'd like us to reflect on whether we are more like Abraham, or more like Nicodemus in our responses to God's call. Over the course of our lives, have we responded with obedience, or with questions?

If you have examples of how you are like Abraham, what did you do in obedience to God's call? If more like Nicodemus, what questions did you need to have answered before you were willing to act?

In my own life, having felt a call to ministry even as I was in high school, at first I responded more like Jonah! I went in the other direction! I felt very strongly that my ministry was serving the developmentally disabled, and so I set my course on learning psychology, on getting jobs serving the handicapped.

But God's call was persistent. And there came a time when I couldn't hide from it any more. The call to go to seminary was strong. Do you think I simply packed everything up and showed up on the front steps of Colgate Rochester Divinity School? Nope! I asked questions! A lot of questions! Betsy and I attended a conference for potential seminarians, where we could ask students and professors and administrators all the questions we wanted, to our hearts content. Of course, everybody there was prepared to answer questions about *how* I could go to seminary. Nobody there was prepared to answer questions about *if* I should go to seminary!

I was expected to find that answer on my own. That was a question better addressed to God. The God that expects obedience, but patiently tolerates pesky questions!

While the bible tells of people like Abraham, those who hear God's call clearly and immediately obey, most of us will hedge toward Nicodemus in our responses. As modern children of God, we have more information, more knowledge about the sacred, and about life in general, than people like Abraham ever did. But some will argue that in the end, the only thing that matters is whether we faithfully obey. The path we take is less important than our ultimate response.

The faith world needs Abrahams, Naomis, Esthers, Jonah's, Isaiahs, Elijahs. All with their own way of answering God's call. And the faith world needs us, reflecting on how God is calling us to act today, and tomorrow. It doesn't matter if we are 4, or 94, the God that is Still Speaking speaks to us, calls to us, beckons us.

And I want to reassure you that it's OK to ask questions! It's not considered unfaithful, disrespectful, or impertinent. Of course, like Nicodemus, we may not get the answers we are hoping for, we may not understand the answers, it may not help us make decisions about our obedience, but it's OK to ask questions!

In the Spiritual Direction leadership program I'm in, we're learning to ask questions about the possible fruits of an action: 'what would happen if I

did this', or, 'what benefits will occur if I do that'. 'What would God want me to do, and what are the possible fruits of that action?' 'Who gains from my actions, me, or someone else?'

Human kind has spent the last 2 millennia developing its intellect, its logic, its collective understanding of the universe. And the more complex the thinking about the universe, the harder it is to respond to God like Abraham. But if we're going to ask questions like Nicodemus, at the very least we might want to ask the right questions!

I take it on faith that God calls to each of us, in some unique and special way. Do we hear it? Every once in a while, we might hear something, maybe a faint whisper. But our faith tells us that the call is there, whether we hear it or not. The first step is to start listening. Nobody can say, I'm too old, or I'm too young, or I'm a lost cause....God reaches out to all of us, calls to all of us, loves all of us...

And God aches for our responses. Imagine a world where God's faithful children put extra effort into listening for what God is saying: we can make that world happen simply by listening for God in our own lives. And the beauty is that we can ask all the questions we want! The story of Jesus needed an Abraham at the beginning and the story of Jesus needed a Nicodemus at the end.

The key to hearing God's call, and being able to respond faithfully is no surprise: it's prayer. It's being in prayer, not just on Sunday mornings when we gather to worship our God, but being in prayer in the morning, or during the day, or in the evening, or whenever we have a quick moment. And prayer often takes the form of a question, doesn't it?

Asking God questions is really just praying! Who knew? Asking the questions we need to ask is really just prayer. And the more we ask, the more we pray. And the more we ask, the better the likelihood that we will hear an answer. An answer from the patient God who aches to be in contact with us!

I don't believe God interacts with us like God did with Abraham: very few of us will ever be asked to do the things God asked Abraham to do. But many of us will find ourselves asking questions like Nicodemus did. Many of us will feel like we need to be private, discreet about our questions. We may feel insecure, or unfaithful. Let's not worry about that. Because if we're asking questions, it means we're engaging our faith, engaging our God. And that is a good thing!

We can learn a lot from the persistence and temerity Nicodemus showed. And while we can't know the details of what he learned from his questions, his behavior tells us that he was convinced enough to act faithfully, in public, at great risk for his safety and his standing in the community. He asked the questions, he engaged the sacred, and he acted.

I pray we can do the same. Amen.