

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

March 12, 2017

2nd Sunday in Lent

Looking for Love – Look for the Helper

Text: Genesis 12:1-4a

John 3:1-17

Every prayer and step of faith, every difference we will make, every ray of hope we shine, every blessing left behind, every soul we long to reach, every heart we hope to teach, every tear we wipe away, every sorrow turned to praise, is only by God's grace. Grace alone which God supplies, strength unknown, God will provide. Christ in us our cornerstone, we will go forth in grace alone.ⁱ

I love that song. It is a word of promise, hope, and comfort, but it is also an awakening that sometimes we independent people find hard to accept. Many of us were taught that we can accomplish anything if we are only willing to work hard enough, if we are willing to do the right thing. At some point, we also learned that not everything really is under our control.

Nicodemus was a successful, self-confident leader in the community. I read this week a commentator who thought that Nicodemus, more than any other person in the Bible, is representative of many of us twenty-first century Christians.ⁱⁱ She said that Nicodemus was spiritually open and curious but also rational. He tried to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He also kept his faith separated from the rest of his life, compartmentalizing it, not quite ready to declare his faith openly and not yet prepared to let it change his life. I think she may be right so I want to jump off from there and perhaps take some liberties, if you will permit me to do so.

I think that Nicodemus, like so many others, was trying to be in control of his life. He was juggling multiple demands and priorities and he thought that they would be easier to handle if he kept them all under control and kept things where they belonged. He was a Pharisee – so he was a religious leader. He followed the rules and he probably helped reinforce them and teach them to others. But there was something missing and he wondered, if maybe, Jesus was the key to what he was looking for. Like all good Jewish men, he was waiting and hoping for the Messiah to come. I think he wanted more of a relationship with God than just duty and obligation. He wanted God to make a difference in his life, to help him, to provide some relief from the oppression of the Roman government. He probably wanted to be able to practice his religion without always watching to be careful that he or others didn't cross a line that would bring the Roman authorities down on them. He wanted a close encounter with God and his keen powers of observation led him to the conclusion that there was something special about Jesus.

He didn't want to upset things. He had a reputation to uphold. He had a responsible position, but he had to know. So, he came to Jesus by night. He knew about the miracles that Jesus had done and he knew that no one could do these things unless God had been involved. Jesus had to have a special connection with God, and Nicodemus wanted that connection as well.

There follows that strange conversation where Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born from above – born of the spirit. If you take this literally, as Nicodemus points out, it is impossible to be born a second time. Maybe this is when things started to click for Nicodemus. Maybe this is when he began to realize that it was not about what he could do. He had

done all the right things. He was a good man. He lived a good life. He followed the rules. He practiced his faith – but something was still missing and there was nothing that he could do about it.

What was required was an act of God. He needed the help of God. John doesn't tell us much more here. We don't have a dramatic scene of Nicodemus falling down before Jesus and proclaiming allegiance or belief. We do get to see Nicodemus twice more in the scripture. He shows up later in John, (7:50-52) when the Pharisees were upset that the temple police had not arrested Jesus. Nicodemus speaks up and points out that their law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing. His defense is greeted with scorn. Finally, we see Nicodemus after Jesus' death (19:39) where he brings spices and along with Joseph of Arimathea – another secret disciple – they prepare Jesus' body for burial.

Still this description of Nicodemus coming to Jesus is very important and there are churches that take this passage about being born again and teach that all we need to do is to pray what is called the sinner's prayer and we will be born again and become a new creature in Christ.

At various times in my life, I have had people ask me, "Are you born again?" "When were you born again?" There sometimes seems to be the idea that having been born again, you are then complete as a Christian and there is nothing more that needs to be done.

I am not one of those people who can point to any particular moment in my life and say, "That's when I was born again." I am completely Wesleyan in the sense that I believe that God was working in my life before I knew it. In the Methodist tradition, we call that Prevenient Grace – God working in our lives before we are know it.

At some point – at many points – in my life, I said “yes” to following God. We call that Justifying Grace – God making it as if we have never sinned – as if we have always been a beloved child of God – because in fact, we have always been, but have not always known it and this is the point where we say “yes” to God.

I believe that every day of my life is part of the faith journey – we call that Sanctifying Grace – and it means quite simply that with God’s help, every day we are becoming more of the person that God has called us to be. We are growing in our relationship with God and as disciples of Jesus. Sometimes, we are more faithful to that relationship and growth than at other times, but the good news is that God doesn’t give up on us and God is always there to love, to help and to guide.

The commentator I mentioned earlier is an associate professor of urban ministry in a seminary and she observed that we live in a culture where religion is normally pushed into the private sphere. Many see faith as appropriate for family and personal morality, but inappropriate for public issues. Pastors who speak about public issues are often chastised and told to leave politics out of the pulpit. On the other hand, pastors who fail to speak about these issues are sometimes accused of taking the easy way out and not being relevant.

Her conclusion was that Nicodemus’ faith was not faulty – as far as it went – but that it was too small and incomplete. It is a dilemma for many of us. We live in a world of diversity and we proclaim that we are tolerant, but sometimes that means that we also water down our faith so that it becomes something supplemental to our lives, rather than the center of who we are.

So many times, and so many ways, we are taught to be strong, to stand on our own two feet. Like the people in the Bible, we look for love,

meaning, happiness, wholeness in places that only temporarily help us feel good. We think that we have to work hard to get approval and to feel that our life is justified – that we are pulling our own weight, and that the only love or life we can have is what we make for ourselves.

The scriptures offer us a different way. The Scriptures get to the very heart of who we are as humans.

In the Psalm that we shared, we heard what became a song of ascents – a song that would be sung going to the temple in Jerusalem – high on a hill. “I lift up my eyes to the hills- from where will my help come?” Many have prayed that psalm looking to the mountains – looking for God. In 8 short verses, we hear 6 times that God is the one who keeps Israel; that God is the one who offers shelter and comfort.

This is a psalm of those who have learned that we cannot be our own god. Sooner or later, we have to look to the hills and ask for help. There is a special gift or blessing given in those moments when we become aware that we can't do it all on our own, when we become aware of our powerlessness. I appreciated one of the commentators who said that these are not the moments when we are more powerless than usual but rather these are the moments when we are more informed than usual about how little power we actually possess. These are the moments when we suffer the reality that we need help beyond ourselves and although it is an uncomfortable realization, it is a blessing to discover that we are not alone – and have never been alone. We are blessed to learn the truth that God is always with us and will never leave us alone.ⁱⁱⁱ It can be very freeing to finally accept and to realize that God loves us enough that God will be our helper in everything we face.

By the way, I have said it before, and I will say it again, I do not believe that God causes everything to happen. If that were so, we would be nothing more than puppets. But I absolutely do believe that God will help us deal with everything that does happen – and God calls us to be helpers as well. With God’s help and God’s grace we are to reach out to others who need help to get through the day and who need God’s love, strength, and presence.

God called Abram – whom we later came to call Abraham – and told him to leave his home and his country and go to a new place that God would show him. Unlike Nicodemus who has to analyze everything, Abram simply went. He and his wife Sarai and their nephew Lot. Abram is promised that God will bless Abram; that from Abram will come a great nation and that through him all the families of the world will be blessed. This is an extremely important moment in God history. As far as we know, Abram doesn’t have any amazing qualifications, but still God calls him. Abram mostly trusts in God during the journey and during his life and he freely takes the step to trust God with his life and his future.

“God’s call, God’s promise, and Abram’s “yes” set a new course for the relationship between Creator and created. To this foundational covenant, we can trace the origins of three of the world’s major faith traditions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – all having a common father (Abraham) and mother (Sarah) who were blessed by God to be a blessing to the nations.”^{iv}

God continues to call each of us – not as people who are particularly talented or gifted but as people who God will equip to do what God calls us to do and be. That’s part of why we sing those words – “Grace alone,

which God supplies, strength unknown, God will provide. Christ in us, our Cornerstone, we will go forth in grace alone.”

At the end of the story about Nicodemus, we hear words that are so well known that they become part of the pop culture. We see signs at football games and other sporting events that say, “John 3:16”. “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.” This is followed by, “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.”

It is all about God as our helper. God loving us so much that God birthed into the world a Son – that God birthed into the world Love – that would embody the grace that we can count on.

Instead of looking for love in all the wrong places, let us look for love in the right places and begin by looking for the helper – for God who is our helper, our keeper, the one upon whom we can always depend; the one who gives love, meaning, hope, promise, forgiveness, and healing to our lives.

ⁱ Grace Alone – Scott Wesley Brown & Jeff Nelson. Sung just before sermon.

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2, Deborah J. Kapp

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid – Robert W. Fisher

^{iv} Keeping Holy Time, Year A. Douglas E. Wingeier, editor.