

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
February 9, 2020
Title: Born Anewⁱ
Scripture: Genesis 12:1-4a
John 3:1-17

He came at night. Cautiously slipping through the streets trying not to draw attention to himself. It would not do for anyone to see him. He was, after all, a well respected religious figure and the man he was going to see was of questionable reputation. There were some who believed that he was a heretic. Others though he might be politically dangerous, potentially plotting an overthrow of the government. It would be easy to dismiss hi as a harmless misguided man, but the crowd that followed him and listened intently to what he said, made it impossible to ignore him. It was important to the man to go and talk to him directly, to learn the truth for himself.

Nicodemus cam by night; hoping to have a private conversation with Jesus. He even had his opening line figured out, “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.” This should soften him up a little; let Jesus know that he meant no harm. Nicodemus looked forward to the conversation; the opportunity to discuss theology with this strange teacher, even if it was risky for him to directly approach Jesus. He knew that the other Pharisees would poke fun at him or criticize him, perhaps even ostracize him, but he had to take the chance.

What he found was not what he expected. Jesus refused to be drawn into Nicodemus’ compliment. Nicodemus was not going to be in control of this conversation. Jesus seemed to acknowledge that he had indeed come from God, and that what he did was connected with the presence of God because Jesus immediately started to talk about the

Kingdom of God. But in such a strange way! “Very truly, I tell you.” In the King James Version, this would be, “Verily, verily, I tell you.” That’s John’s code phrase for listen up, this is very important. And Jesus will use this phrase three more times in the conversation.

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” To Nicodemus this sounds like a riddle. Unsure of what “born from above” means, or perhaps mishearing what Jesus said, Nicodemus wants to know how one can be born after having grown old? “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus and Nicodemus then get into a discussion about being born of water and the spirit.

This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, when someone in the Bible is told to do something that seems, if not impossible, than at the very least unreasonable. In our reading from Genesis, Abram is told to leave his country and his father’s tribe and home to go to a new land that God will show him. According to the Bible, Abram was about 75 years old at the time and his wife Sarai was about 65.

As if being asked to leave your land and all that was familiar was not enough for a man of his age, he was also told that God would make of him a great nation and that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. In other places in the book of Genesis we would find Abram and Sarai questioning how they can have a child at their advanced age. At other places, we’d find them debating various aspects of God’s promises and taking things into their own hands but here there is no record of a discussion. We hear only that “Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot (his nephew) went with him.”

What we discover in these stories – Abram’s and Nicodemus’ is that our God is a God who brings life out of places that are as good as dead. If we look, we’ll find that in several other places in the Bible. We hear about the prophet Elijah’s vision of a valley filled with dry bones – very dry bones that are brought together and given skin and sinew and finally the breath of life. (Ezekiel 37). We hear the prophet Isaiah talking about a time when “the eyes of the blind (will) be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.” (Isaiah 35:5-7 NIV)

We’ll find Jesus performing miracles in many places. We’ll even find him bringing dead people to life. Eventually, we encounter the greatest miracle of all – Jesus, himself being raised from the dead to life. But then that miracle opens the way for other miracles – the reality, the promise, that we too, may experience eternal life.

When we think about all of this, we can go back to Nicodemus – a man in pursuit of the truth – a man who wants answers – a man who is searching and willing to take some risks in his search. Nicodemus knows all about Abram and his journey of faith. He knows all about God’s promises to Abraham and how they were fulfilled. He knows about the prophet Ezekiel’s vision and the words of the prophet Isaiah and Jeremiah and others. He knows the psalms and the witness of scripture. He does not yet know a lot about Jesus – that’s why he is here, to learn more.

Essentially Jesus says to him, “I know you don’t understand all of this right now, and that’s okay. You’ve taken one step. You’ve come here at night. You’re starting to ask the questions.” I hear Jesus speaking to Nicodemus on his own level – a theologian, someone who can understand

and discuss. This is one occasion when Jesus doesn't tell stories. He speaks as plainly as he can – but even so, what he is telling Nicodemus cannot yet be understood by him – and that's okay.

I believe that Jesus offers that same message to us. “I know you don't understand all of this right now and that's okay.” In our faith journey, it is okay for us to not understand. It's okay for us to have questions. At the same time, we have to ask, “How much risk are we willing to take? Are we willing to live with the unknown? Are we willing to live with the questions and are we willing to journey with Jesus while we seek answers to those questions?”

Abram had to answer those questions before he set out with his wife and animals and possessions. Nicodemus has to answer that question – are you willing to take the risk of being born from above? Are you willing to let go of your old life and trust God for new birth?

Charles Aaron, wrote that “Risk is simply the ability to reach beyond the usual limits in reaching for a goal.”ⁱⁱ He went on to say, “the same can be said for living a life of faith. It's when we face our fears and take a risk that we experience the thrill of following Jesus. For faith and risk are intertwined. It is only when we stretch the horizons of our lives, it is only when we venture away from the comfortable to follow Christ that faith takes on its true dimension. That's what Jesus was trying to tell Nicodemus. You must be born again. You must risk a new beginning. You must trust yourself to a new birth in God to truly be part of the kingdom of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This risk, this journey is an amazing adventure with exciting twists and turns. It is an opportunity to live in a way that we might never know otherwise. It is an opportunity to experience life in a new way. The adventure is all around us.

Aaron continues to talk about that adventure of faith. “When we follow God’s teachings on honesty despite the fear of the price it may cost us, that’s spiritual adventure. When we ask God to open doors for us to make a difference in others around us despite our fear of where that may lead us, that’s spiritual adventure. When we talk to someone about our faith, in spite of the fear of what they may think of us because of it, that’s spiritual adventure. When we think about God enough to want to be in worship in spite of the inconvenience that it may cause us, that’s spiritual adventure.

“There are times when we leave the smooth paved road, when we abandon the boring residential streets for the adventure of unmarked trails – that’s when faith becomes real and that the new birth that Jesus is promising us. Faith means being born again as a new person, leaving the comfortable behind to adventure with God.”^{iv}

A journey in faith is risky – and the risks are different for each person. For some it may mean a radical change in life style or in career. For others it may mean starting a new path of Bible Study or other spiritual discipline. For still others it may mean some basic training – beginning to study the Bible or beginning to ask God to lead you in the paths of your life. For some it may mean believing and claiming that the God who brought life into the almost dead life of Abraham is the same God who can and will enter into the dead and frightening places in your life and bring life and healing.

For all of us, it means believing that God is God – we are not. God will walk with us in every area of our lives and invite us to participate in some grand adventures. Does that seem hard to do? Are you afraid you don’t have enough faith? Don’t worry. The Bible tells us that we only need faith the size of a mustard seed, and that’s really tiny. The quantity of our faith is not what matters; it’s using the faith we have that counts.

As a church it will mean having the faith and the willingness to continue to work with a coach, to continue to ask where and how God is calling us into the future. It will mean being willing to ask and live with some tough questions and to be willing to live in the uncomfortable rather than rushing to some band aid solution that we hope will fix everything.

At some point or another in most of our lives, we have known a time when we felt discouraged, exhausted, and maybe even immobilized – finding it hard to keep going. At those times we don't have the energy to pick ourselves up and start over, to try again, to find hope. But the story of both Abram and Nicodemus tell us that God comes to us even in, and especially in, those difficult times and invites us into a new life – a new beginning – a new birth, if you will. God invites us into a new life that only God can show us and one where we will never walk alone.

By the way, did you notice that we don't hear what Nicodemus did after this discussion? Some commentators say he went away frustrated and sort of disappeared. Others indicate that later he took some small safe steps, nothing too risky, nothing involving too much commitment.

A few chapters later in John's Gospel, we find Nicodemus taking a risk and standing up to the court of law to demand that Jesus have the right to defend himself. After Jesus' death, we find Nicodemus with Joseph of Arimathea, carrying about 100 pounds of spices and oils to prepare Jesus body for burial. In that passage of the 19th chapter of John, we hear Joseph of Arimathea described as being a secret disciple because of his fear. Perhaps Joseph and Nicodemus found comfort and courage together in their mostly secretive ways of being disciples.

I think it's good that we don't know much more about Nicodemus. I think it's good that Joseph of Arimathea is described as a secret disciple.

They remind us that we don't have to be superstars. They are people we can relate to, and we can remember that they did what they could. At the same time, we are reminded that when God calls, God empowers and when we allow God to lead us, there are amazing adventures waiting for us. So put on your seat belt and safety helmet if you want them, and get ready to explore the new life that God has for each of us and for our congregation when we are willing to take the risk and trust God for the journey.

ⁱ Note that large portions of this sermon came from a sermon that I preached in February 2008.

ⁱⁱ Aaron, Charles L. Jr. editor. Sermons on the Gospel Readings, Series ii, Cycle A CSS Publishing, Lima, OH 2007. P. 127

ⁱⁱⁱ Aaron, p.128

^{iv} Aaron p 128