

Sunday, March 12, 2017

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
The Ins and Outs of a Faith Journey

Genesis 12:1-5 & John 3:1-17

Genesis 12:1-5 - 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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I 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.* ⁴ 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. ⁵Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

INTRODUCTION TO THE JOHN READING

The gospel of John tells us that Jesus' teachings and his healing people on the Sabbath particularly troubled the religious leaders of the Jewish law-abiding sect of the "Pharisees." But one of them named Nicodemus was impressed with Jesus and his actions; he considered him an inspirational spiritual leader and wanted to learn more from him, without alerting his fellow Pharisees.

Let us listen to the story of their encounter:

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 kingdom 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 kingdom 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.' ⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' ¹⁰Jesus 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. 12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.* 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* 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.17 '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.

Informal Introductory Words:

So far so good; I haven't gotten lost in this big, beautiful building, or in Concord. I haven't tripped over the chancel steps, or insulted anyone that I know of. Neither Hjalmar nor Bob have taken me aside yet to say: "I think we made a mistake." But here I'm delivering my inaugural sermon at TriCon, and all bets are off!

I am reminded of a preacher's son who inquired, "Mommy, I notice every Sunday morning when you come to the pulpit to preach, you bow your head. What are you doing?" She explained, "I'm asking God to give me a good sermon." The little boy replied, "Then, why doesn't he?"

Let's pray together anyway...

I so look forward to getting better acquainted with you! Bits of *my* story will come out over time in sermons and in our dealings with each other. Here's one: Almost twelve years ago, Steve and I packed up the U-Haul to make the big move from Seattle to Boston. We had already downsized our possessions, but even so, at the last minute, we were still removing quite a few objects in order to get the truck doors to close! Then we placed our suitcases in the car, along with our cats, Stripey and Blackie, and set out cross-country so I could pursue a PhD at Boston University, without full funding or jobs. Our son, Nathan, was already "back East," a freshman at Hamilton College in upstate New York; his Mom and Dad coming closer to him, like it or not! It was a journey in faith reminiscent of Abram and Sarai's.

And now, a sojourn in Concord, MA! We could never have guessed back then that the call of God would lead us to this place where American history, literature, and New England nature coalesce into a kind of womb for new birth! What a gift! I picked up my old college textbook to read Thoreau's *Walden* again – it seemed fitting – recalling how the young adult Henry David, Harvard educated but without a clear vocation, left his parents' home for Walden Pond. Reading his words, I perceive traces of Nicodemus' nighttime trip to Jesus: *I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*¹

So it is that God calls us from our settled existence to journey in faith. The impetus may be joyful and chosen: the sendoff at your wedding, or frightening and by chance: the loss of a job. Last week the situation we heard about was Moses and the ex-slaves traveling in the

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *The American Tradition in Literature*, 4th edition (Grosset & Dunlap, 1974), 1280.

wilderness toward the Promise of God. Last fall, it was the retirement of John Lombard after twenty-three years of settled ministry, and you heard, “Go, TriCon, into the unknown territory of an Acting Senior and the search for a vision.” Then last January, for the United States, it was the change of a President and a dramatic shift in agenda and leadership style! The youths’ refrain in the Tom Bates skit last Sunday resonates with *all* these examples: “Yup; it’s going to be different, very different!”

When God calls us to leave our settled existence and journey in faith, we naturally wonder: “Where are we going, and how do we know God’s call? This question sounds very much like the last one of the three that TriCon is trying to answer during this transition phase: “What is God now calling us to be and do as a church?” In other words, as Wendy Vander Hart preached last Sunday, you are seeking to name your “Why.”

No one bible verse is going to answer this for you, nor instantly. No single sermon is going to say it all. It will take time and prayer, in relationship, to become clear, but *this* morning, what can we learn from these two lectionary texts and the testimonies of people before us who have journeyed in faith to follow the call?

First, when God calls, we can expect that, as was the case for Abram and Sarai, the message will be: “Go out. Go out to become a blessing. Years before, Abram’s father, Terah, had left Ur in the direction of Canaan, getting as far as Haran, where the family stopped and stayed. But upon his dad’s death, *Abram* began to get the itch and hear the divine voice: “Go out from here to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and a blessing to *all* the families of the earth.”

So we can begin to recognize God’s call when we see the road we’re walking as a journey outward in faith to others. God’s call has the dimension of meeting people we don’t know, of facing new situations and worlds with the open hand of blessing, and through these often uncomfortable and stumbling encounters, being changed *ourselves* into the walking blessing that God wants for the world! This certainly fits with Jesus’ non-partisan command to love our neighbors, and with *God’s* outward, incarnational journey through the Son to save the so-loved world.

Secondly, when God calls, we can expect that, as was the case for Nicodemus, the message will be: “Go in. Go in to be born of the Spirit. When Nicodemus protests the impossibility of re-entering his mother’s womb, I notice that Jesus doesn’t respond, “No, I know. You’re right. Isn’t that silly!” Instead, he keeps this important lay leader on the uncomfortable edge of transformation: “No, really, Nicodemus. Truly I tell you, you must be born ‘anew’ - ‘from above’ - you must discover your *real* self in relationship with God and others.”

In *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker, Celie’s sister, Nettie, tells her that before she went on mission to Africa, “What I knew about myself before couldn’t *even* fill a thimble!”² We begin to recognize *God’s* call when we see the path we tread as a journey inward in faith - a kind of reverse birth, exploring honestly what has shaped us, uncovering along the way our gifts, our weaknesses, and our inner longings, growing in the Spirit to become fully able to “love our neighbors *as ourselves.*”

I am indebted to Gordon and Mary Crosby, the founders of The Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. for helping me see these two journeys within our scripture texts, because this couple started that faith community as a new form of church in the late 1940s on the very concept

² Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Pocket Books, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1982), 138.

of nurturing “the journey inward” and “the journey outward.” You can look it up and read more,³ but the church began in cell groups with members who were committed to discipleship: intentional vulnerability, accountability, and service – the journey IN, which organically led outward in mission, such as The Potter’s House, one of the first coffee house ministries. This was *their* customized journey in faith to their particular call.

I see TriCon taking steps OUT in faith: your worship “Exodus” last summer, the youth mission trip, which is so meaningful that adults are clammering for one, and the transition question: *Who is* our neighbor and their needs? I also see TriCon taking steps IN, toward each other and into the womb of God: your small groups are going deeper and attracting more people, and during “Evolve 2017,” you’re asking the transition question: *Who are* we now, and who are we becoming?

Jesus goes in and out with us this Lent and beyond, because *he* has made the journey in faith: *inward* into deeper prayerful communion with the “Father,” or “Papa,” as he referred to God, along with self-examination: *Who am I? What am I made of? What’s my purpose? Can I trust God and can I trust myself to go the distance?”* to his *outward* journey from a more settled existence in Galilee to Jerusalem, even to those who would resist, reject, abandon, betray, and kill him, ultimately to fulfill God’s original vision and become a blessing to the entire world!

³ inwardoutward.org/the-church-of-the-saviour/churches/