

Second Sunday in Lent (Lent 2A)i – March 16, 2014
Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17
By The Rev. Kevin D Bean

Today we hear stories about some elders who show a youthfulness of heart as they let God take them beyond their comfort zones; and who, by beginning again, live lives fully and faithfully until the day they died. First we hear about Abraham who, at the age of 75—a time when most folk would be settled in and sitting tight in their “golden years”—instead, heeds the call to uproot himself and his family and journey to a whole new land, where he hears the possibility and promise of becoming the father of a great nation. It is an irrational act on his part, unbelievable that Abraham and his wife Sarah and some of their extended family would move away from a safe, secure home to launch out for an unknown destination, in obedience to a call from an unknown voice. Both Abraham and Sarah remain silent throughout today’s verses of this story. Their response to the divine voice is not words but actions: they go, they settle, they build altars, they call on the name of God. They somehow believe in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. And they watch the evidence change, as eventually, at the great age of ninety, we are told that Sarah gives birth to a son and names him Isaac—which is the Hebrew for “laughter”—because Sarah herself laughed at the notion she would have a child. And from there began the generations of the people of Israel.

Now before we turn to our gospel story of the elder Nicodemus, I’m sure many of you have been approached by someone who has asked you, “Are you saved?” or “Have you been born again?” It’s happened to me in college, in seminary, at a religious bookstore, outside of Fenway Park (!), and in several New York City subways, to name a few times and places. Sometimes I was asked this even while, and probably because, I was wearing my clergy collar. These encounters have always put me on the spot and made me a tad uncomfortable, making me want to be somewhere else. It boils down to whether we believe that salvation is something that happens to us on a certain date and time as a completed event—a done deal—or whether salvation happens to us over time, lasting a lifetime, and beyond. Our lessons today suggest a longer, indeed lifelong, process.

In our gospel story of Nicodemus the scholar and elder leader of the Jewish Council, we see a man who, although he represented a religious tradition that was pretty sure of its beliefs, is nonetheless open enough to allow his beliefs to be examined and challenged. He knows but he is curious. He is an adherent and yet also a seeker. His belief and his understanding of salvation is not a done deal. But, because he has his own reputation to uphold as a standard-bearer for the faith, he decides to pay Jesus a visit under cover of darkness. As the conversation ensues, Jesus tells Nicodemus that what the whole thing boils down to is that unless we are born from above—or anew or again (depending on how we translate that word)—we cannot enter the Kingdom of God. That immediately has the two talking with each other on very different planes: Nicodemus on a cerebral, literal, biological level, and Jesus at a heart, metaphoric and spiritual level. But Jesus isn’t put off by Nicodemus’ literalism, nor even his sarcasm when he says, “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Now, a gust of wind may have happened to come along at this point, giving Jesus an image to share that being born from above is like that. “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,” says Jesus. Spirit—or “ruach” in Hebrew—means “wind” or “breath.” Being born from above is like that. It isn’t something you do. The wind does it. The breath of God’s Spirit does it—a spiritual rebirth at whatever age—and not just once, but again and again.

“How can these things be?” asks Nicodemus; and that’s when Jesus lets him have it. Maybe Nicodemus is a great scholar, Jesus insists; but if he couldn’t see something as plain as this, he’d better go back to square one. As Frederick Buechner puts it, Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, “I’m telling you God’s got such a thing for this [messed up world] that He has sent me ...so if you don’t believe your own eyes, then maybe you’ll believe mine, maybe you’ll believe me, maybe you won’t come sneaking around scared half to death in the dark any more but will come to, come clean, come to *life*.”ⁱⁱ Here is Jesus, alive, spirit-filled, telling this great thinker to stop thinking so hard! As I’ve come to learn—and as a colleague of mine once noticed—the way people change, to the extent we do change - which is often barely and slowly, is to have something happen in the heart. And then, and often only then, does the mind follow. We may think about it, even do some further inquiry or research. And then we find out why we have felt and have moved in a new direction. The simple lesson of that nighttime visit of these two teachers is that we need to keep our lives, our hearts and minds, open and ready for surprise and change. Let the wind of God’s Spirit make us free. Let ourselves be freed of our presuppositions, and then think. If we think we have it all so well figured out that further inquiry and exploration is unnecessary, that is exactly the point at which our spiritual life begins to harden and fossilize. So, let the wind blow, let the heart function and lead us, and then, do our thinking.ⁱⁱⁱ

We don’t hear more from Nicodemus at this point, but something—albeit ambiguous, uncertain and indecisive—is stirring in his own heart, and mind; and his relationship with Jesus is not over, as we see when we meet up with him again in the seventh chapter of John. There in that scene, in the temple when Jesus was teaching, his words enthrall some but divide others. Some of the chief priests and Pharisees, backed by the Temple police, want to arrest Jesus, but Nicodemus intervenes as a voice of reason in the midst of the growing chaos saying, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” Offering at least a lukewarm defense for Jesus, and a calming presence in the midst of this storm, Nicodemus finds his voice, now in broad daylight. And later, on the afternoon of Jesus’ crucifixion, Nicodemus appears again, in broad daylight, along with another elder, Joseph of Arimathea, to pay his last respects and help give Jesus a proper burial. It was a dangerous thing for Nicodemus to be doing, what with the pressure of his peers, and the Romans on the prowl for Jesus’ known associates. And so, Nicodemus appears at the beginning, middle and end of John’s gospel, and his faith journey progresses each time we encounter him, as he continues to be born anew, again, from above.

Abraham, Sarah and Nicodemus—none of them Christian, by the way—are presented to us today as models of the journey of faith to which we are all called. In much of the Bible, including our readings today, faith is not a noun, as something we possess; but rather, a verb, as in believing and journeying which are ambiguous efforts. Believing and journeying are just as complicated as the rest of our lives, and are subject to all the ambiguities, uncertainties and indecisiveness of being human.^{iv} And so, faith is an on-again, off-again journey, sometimes two steps forward and one step backwards, or even sideways. Faith is journeying often without maps and often full of surprises. It is that opening of space in our hearts and minds in which the Spirit blows—God acts—at all ages and stages of our lives, even when our heart becomes old and battered and our mind becomes a little forgetful. Faith is a mystery and a power that grows out of a longing that stirs in every soul. And mystery is something we can embrace, not conquer, or even define. If we keep a longing space open for God to act in our hearts and minds, we can then risk leaving a safe space, not knowing where we are going, but going anyway as did Abraham and Sarah. And we can then risk the confusion of dealing with life lived on a new level of awareness, as did Nicodemus. Sigmund Freud wrote that religion was the universal attempt to recapture the “oceanic contentment of the womb.” Well, Abraham, Sarah and Nicodemus show us just the opposite as each experienced a profound dislocation of order in their lives accompanied by great personal sacrifice. They move from their comfort zones to true uncertainty, and then to deep blessing. Faith is the peace that is no peace—a willingness to go, without any guarantees, when God calls—and to begin again, to be born again and anew, from above.^v

Gee, I wonder whether we should consider adding to our statement of welcome a phrase something like, “All are welcome, regardless of the number of times you’ve been born again!” For here, in word and sacrament and our life and work together, Jesus, the author of our salvation, touches our inquiring hearts and, as another colleague put it, he “turns our questions into conversations that go into the night and last a lifetime.”^{vi}

ⁱ See Lent 4B, Trinity Sunday B, Propers 14C and 22C

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 122.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am indebted to William McD. Tully for some of the ideas in this paragraph – see “Free as the wind” (New York: St. Bartholomew’s Church, February 20, 2005).

^{iv} See Karoline M. Lewis in D. Bartlett and B.B.Taylor, eds. Feasting on the Word (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Year A, Vol. 2, p. 73

^v Today’s lessons also share how precious life is—not because it is unchangeable, like a diamond; but because it is vulnerable, like a newborn baby or an older person (such as Abraham, Sarah and Nicodemus). To love life means to love its vulnerability, asking for or accepting care, attention, guidance and support. All of life and death are connected by vulnerability. The newborn child and the older person both remind us of the preciousness of our lives. Those of us somewhere in between should not forget the preciousness, vulnerability and interdependence of life during the times when we feel certain, powerful, successful and independent.

^{vi} Mary Haddad, “Saved every time” (New York: St. Bartholomew’s Church, February 20, 2005)