

Abram and the Night Visitor

Dale Ramerman; Yr A: John 3:1-17; Gen. 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Our readings from Genesis, Romans and the Gospel of John are seminal writings in the story of our faith, writings that explore what it means to believe. I think I have been wrestling with the meaning of these texts all my life. I preached on our gospel text about Nicodemus 12 years ago. Does anyone remember what I said? Good, I don't either. So let's start afresh.

The Genesis reading is so short it's easily missed.

The Lord says to Abram,

-Leave your country and family and go to a land I will show you.

-I will bless you and make of you a great nation.

-Through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

So Abram went as the Lord directed.

In responding to God's call, Abram leaves his kin group, which is the source of his identity and security, and sets out on a journey to an unknown place, knowing only that he will be changed forever.

These verses bridge the time before history, the time of stories and myths of creation and floods, that were shared between cultures, and the beginning of the history of the Hebrew people, a history orally told and retold for a millennium and then written out and incorporated into holy scripture. This short story about Abram's call is the beginning of the story of the Children of Israel, and ultimately of our Christian faith. Our reading also sets a pattern for both the Children of Israel, and for Christians, in dealings with God: God calls, and it is up to us to respond, or not.

Our Genesis reading provides a good example of why we always include an OT passage in our worship readings. The story from creation, through this passage about Abram's call and response, the Exodus, the promised land, the law and prophets, the Exile, and Christ's birth, teachings, death, resurrection and promised return to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, is for Christians, one seamless, linear story, the story of God's dealing with human kind. For Christians, history is not cyclical.

God with his call to Abram seemingly abandons God's original strategy of threats and curses, ("the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die") and establishes that God will have an ongoing relationship with God's creation, including those human beings who have previously both delighted and broken the God's heart. Through this new chosen people, the Lord gives the Torah, and in that great gift the Lord reveals the way to choose life over death, blessings rather than curses. For Christians, Abram's choice leads ultimately to the saving work of Jesus Christ, the reconciliation between Creator and creature and the victory over death accomplished in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

With the story of Abram's calling in mind, let's turn to our Gospel reading from the third chapter of the Gospel of John.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee who knew the Torah and took its commands seriously, had been observing Jesus, listening to his teaching, and knew of his miracles. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, seeking the light

from Jesus. (The images of darkness and light are central to the Gospel of John, and for Nicodemus to arrive at night suggests a separation from God.) Nicodemus says to Jesus that no one can do these signs - Jesus' miracles - apart from the presence of God. I hear this as a "hey, Jesus, I know you're a good guy" self-introduction, but says little about Nicodemus, and leaves Jesus unimpressed with Nicodemus' shallow reliance on miracles. Jesus engages Nicodemus by using a metaphor of birth: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

When Nicodemus dodges by suggesting a literal understanding of birth, Jesus says, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. When Nicodemus dodges again, Jesus almost mocks Nicodemus for willful ignorance: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?"

And then Jesus says:

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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

The first part of Jesus' statement is the Bible verse John 3:16, held up for the TV cameras in many sporting events. It is a passage frequently misunderstood because it is read without its context. I suggest that to understand spiritual rebirth as just a personal conversion, disregards the element of Christ's death on the cross which, through the work of the Spirit, calls us to respond. Read in context, I think we see that Jesus is not saying that belief alone grants admission to the Kingdom of God. Being born from above results in changed behavior, good works visible because done in the light. Being born from above is not just willing or believing with the mind, but rather, about what does with one's heart and life. If we respond to the call of the Spirit with only our minds, and not our actions, we could be said to resemble Nicodemus who came at night to talk to question Jesus, but then disappears from the story.

When Abram heard God's call, he did not seek more information or respond by say, "Yes God, I'm all for you, I believe in you," and then continue to drink his camel's milk tea. Rather, Abram packed his family and camels, and headed west for a destination he knew nothing about.

In the Gospel of John, faith, I suggest is more than a noun, something we have or don't have. Nor is it a conclusion based on weighing the evidence. Faith is like a verb, something we do, a commitment, a leap into the unknown, empowered by the Holy Spirit. When we hear God's call to us, we are being summoned, like Abram, to respond by doing, not just by believing.

Because becoming a follower of Christ changes our lives forever, we conduct baptisms, which are admission to Christ's church, in public worship. And four times a year we publically affirm in public

worship our baptismal covenant, our promises to proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, and strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being

But what about Nicodemus? Did he just slip away into the darkness of unbelief? We don't know, but the text, by not indicating any response to Jesus can be read as suggesting he did just disappear. Nicodemus is mentioned twice more in the Gospel of John. In chapter 7 Nicodemus says, on Jesus' behalf before religious leaders who seem in a rush to judgment, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" Then in chapter 19, Nicodemus, at night, brings an extraordinary quantity of burial spices and joins with Joseph of Arimathea, who unlike Nicodemus is identified as a disciple of Jesus, to prepare the body of Jesus for burial and place the body in the tomb. So, a failure to answer the question, a wishy-washy defense of Jesus, and another deed done at night.

History has not judged Nicodemus well:

- In the early church those who professed to follow Christ, but to remain secret followers and continued to worship the Roman gods in public, were, according some commentators, called Nicolaitans.
- During the Reformation, some 1500 years later, many who claimed to sympathized with the movement for reform of the church, butg were unwilling to be identified publicly, were called Nicodemites.
- Four hundred years later, during the 1930's and 40's in Germany, the majority of Christians were willing to accommodate the racism and anti-Semitism and continued to worship in the churches that went along with the Nazi ideology, just as the Nicolaitans and Nicodemites had done. In response, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the courageous pastor along with others, started what they called "Confessing Churches" which publicly condemned Nazi ideology and the establishment churches. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, which was the confession of faith of the Confessing Churches, states: "As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so in the same way and with the same seriousness, **he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life.**" For Bonhoeffer's many deeds of faith done in a very public way, he was executed by the Nazis in 1945, just days before the German surrender.

In this Holy season of Lent, may we listen for God's call, and respond by being doers of the Word, in the bright light of the public square, and not just hearers who believe in secret.

Amen
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