

## Second Sunday in Lent/March 16, 2014

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17;

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### *"Two Old Guys: Nic & Abe"*

Today's readings include two remarkable characters from the scriptures. Two old guys. Each a seeker in his own way.

From Genesis we have Abram (who becomes Abraham), the father of the three great monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The short passage we heard today marks the beginning of a great journey. It is the beginning of the people Israel, a people chosen by God to become God's light to the world. Our passage today is the hinge, as commentators say, between the primeval history (Gen. 1-11) and the story of Israel's earliest ancestors (Gen. 12-36).

Abram had traveled from the land of his birth, Ur of the Chaldeans, with his father Terah, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot. They were headed for the land of Canaan but settled in Haran for a time and it was there that Abram's father died. It was after that, that Abram heard the voice of God which called him to leave his country, his kindred, his father's house, and go to the land God would show him. Abram was 75 years old when he began his journey and Sarai just a couple years younger. They were old and could have easily decided that this was the end of their lives, that nothing was going to change and they might as well stay put, right where they were.

But then God made a promise, a covenant, to make of Abram and Sarai a great nation, ultimately to be the father and mother of a multitude of nations. But Abram began to get a bit nervous. God had promised that his descendents would be like the dust of the earth, so many that one could not count them (Gen. 13:16). But it seemed that God was missing one important fact. Abram still had no offspring, no child of his own. Sarai had not been able to bare him neither a son or a daughter.

So God comes to Abram in a vision. He brings him outside, in the night, and tells him to look at the stars, telling him to count them if he can and says, *"So shall your descendents be."* And then we have that wonderful line, *"And he (Abram) believed the Lord and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."* (Gen. 15:6).

Abram had faith and it was his faith that made him *righteous*, in right relation with God. He and Sarai were able to relinquish what seemed to be the reality in which they existed: Sarai was barren, unable to have children. But somehow they were able to look beyond that and embrace the possibility of newness, of the unthinkable, that their descendents would be like the stars, uncountable. Despite their advanced years, they trusted in God.

Commentator Carol A. Newsom notes, *"Genesis itself is completely uninterested in Abram's previous character and experiences. The focus of the narrative is not who Abram was, but who he will become."* (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, p. 53). God, it seems, does not look back but only forward, calling us to move on from where we've been, where we are, to the new thing, the unseen and perhaps unbelievable thing, God has in store for us.

In the gospel of John, we have the person of Nicodemus. Not mentioned at all in any of the other gospels or anywhere else in scripture, he is very likely a product of the author's imagination. In fact, the whole gospel of John, a book often referred to as the "spiritual" or "mystic" gospel, was written to explain the *mystery* of the Christ, not to give an historical account of his life. Even the way John begins his gospel tells us we are dealing with something,

someone unique and special. *"In the beginning was the WORD and the WORD was with God and the WORD was God." "In him was life, and the life was the light of humanity. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."*

So we have this man Nicodemus. He is an old man, a Pharisee, a respected leader of the Jewish people. In John's gospel, he is representative of Judaism, of what we might call the "old school" Judaism of the author's time. You can't get much higher than Nicodemus has gotten in his society. He's got it all, wealth, rank, respect. Yet, he comes to see Jesus. He comes because he knows that there is something more, something he hasn't yet been able to find.

He comes at night in the darkness. John uses this kind of contrasting imagery such as darkness and light, day and night, to highlight his point. John knows there is power in a light that shines brightly amidst the darkness and for him, Jesus is the spiritual light that enlightens any darkness we may have. Through him we can come to know a rebirth in our lives, the chance to be born anew, from above. The opportunity in every moment to know the presence and power of God's holy Spirit working in our lives, a new kind of existence in the spirit that breaks through the darkness of our normal, day to day way of being.

This morning I got up early to finish this sermon. It was still very dark. But as I entered our sun room (what we call the star room), I saw the bright light of the moon shining through the windows. It was powerful. And as I stood at the window and looked out at that bright moon shining there, I found myself transfixed by the power of that bright light. Surrounded by the darkness, that bright light gathered all my attention, drew all my focus right to itself. All other thoughts all other distractions seemed to vanish away in that moment. I think this is exactly what John would have us understand about Jesus. That like that light in the darkness, we can overcome all that may surround us, any trouble, any worry, any estrangement, any fear, any danger, any hopelessness, anything that keeps us from the love of God, by focusing on his presence and the knowledge that in God, all things are made new. All things are possible.

Abraham and Nicodemus were old men. They had lived long lives. They had seen their day. By all accounts, they had no reason or right to expect that anything new was about to enter their lives. And yet it did. God called out to each of them, in the darkness.

God calls out to each of us as well. Whether we are young or old, it doesn't matter. We are called to a deeper union with God, to a spiritual journey, just like Abram and Sarai were called to, to a spiritual life like Nicodemus was invited to enter, to see and to become ourselves, a spiritual light with Christ that shines through the darkness of our world.

In this season of Lent we are invited to seek out our God, to look upon the light that is Christ, and to open ourselves up to the new life, the new birth, the new way of being that is available for all people. Our lives are not done. In this time and in this moment, our journey has only begun. Amen.