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March 20, 2011

Scripture Readings:  
Genesis 12:1-4a  
John 3:1-17

## **Spirit Journey**

Abraham and Nicodemus are in the very same place with God in these texts. They are in a place of wonder. Like we asked the Spirit in our call to worship this morning they are asking “I wonder how I’ll wander - if I follow God. I wonder how I’ll wander if I accept this journey. I wonder how I’ll wander if I am saved. What must I do? How do I get there? Who is coming along? How come you are asking me? How is it possible to have eternal life? I wonder how I’ll wander with this God in my life.

Abraham and Nicodemus are in a place of “checking God out.” They are about as far in their relationship as a couple on their first date. We know this because both of them are being directed into the first steps of a life of faith. Abraham is immediately blessed and so he takes the first step of the journey trusting in the promises of God.

Nicodemus seems a little more skeptical as he meets Jesus. We know this mainly because of the symbolism in the text. Nicodemus as a Pharisee and Jewish leader is a little nervous about his encounter with Jesus so he arrives at night (which in John always symbolizes a time of unbelief, doubt, ignorance, fear or temptation). He shows obvious curiosity as he comes to meet the teacher but he likely does not want any of his peers to know he is meeting with Jesus lest they judge him a traitor.

Still, perhaps to butter him up a bit Nicodemus praises Jesus by saying he knows he is a teacher from God because of the great works he has done. Jesus responds to his flattery by saying “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from *anathen*.” (which can be translated born again, anew or from above). Clearly Nicodemus chooses the ‘born again’ translation as he fails to recognize Jesus is speaking of the Spirit of God rather than of human birth. So while wondering how he can reenter his mothers womb, Nicodemus remains in the dark as Jesus explains that all who look to him and follow his ways will receive life

healing just as those in Moses' time who looked upon the serpent raised on the pole to be healed. (Numbers 21:9)

Jesus continues to draw Nicodemus in by sharing with him the love of the God of Abraham who promises to bless 'all the families of the earth.' (Gen. 12:3) Finally Jesus brings Nicodemus to the transformation part of his journey as he calls him out of the darkness into the light so that he may see God's spirit at work. (As we continue in John you will begin to notice that believers, and those who recognize Jesus as God's vessel represent the light. Unbelievers who come and live in darkness turn away from or do not recognize God in Jesus).

At this point in the text it is not clear if Nicodemus comes to 'the light' although we do see him defend Jesus further on in the gospel and then in chapter 20 he takes spices to his burial place. So I tend to believe Nicodemus did eventually recognize Jesus for who he was.

Throughout John's gospel we read a variety of encounter with Jesus stories. In each of these encounters the individual meets Jesus in a different light and circumstance perhaps so that we might realize each of us comes to the spirit or is born from spirit in a different way, with peculiar experience and timing. "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." (8) Faith is always a process, and believing may take longer to get to for some.

What we do know however is that God is there with us on the journey whether we recognize it or not. Lewis Smedes put it this way. "God is there, ahead of time, before you get there, waiting, hands open, to hold you when you are sure you are sinking. You will feel his presence, feel his strength, feel the courage that comes from his support, if you just let him hold you. And when you do feel him, you will know that it will be all right with you at that moment, later, or any time....".

God just keeps on trying. From Abraham, to Nicodemus, to today God longs to bless 'all the families of the earth' because the characteristics of God are abundant love and grace. And so we live in the promise of more just as Abraham we step into a future promise of blessing. To live in the light of faith is a never-ending work of the spirit which will lead us into new places all the time. Against popular theory my experience and belief is that a journey with the Spirit is rarely black and white and it happens repeatedly (not just once). The wind of the spirit blows where it chooses (3:8). And yet it is always based in a love that is given freely to us.

I experienced an example of that in John 3:16 this week. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life.” was broken open for me in a new way this week. David Lose pointed out that ‘the world’ (Kosmos in Greek) normally signifies that entity which is hostile towards God. Lose suggested that one might translate the verse to say "For God so loved the *God-hating* world...!" Reminding us that not only is God’s love for all but it is beyond compare. God’s love might even be considered intrusive “somewhat offensive.”<sup>1</sup> God’s love is not optional, it is given. It is promised us. God loved this God hating world unconditionally.

Often when this verse comes up we might wonder is there anyone I would die for - or would anyone die for me? I find that hard to consider outside of a crisis. The idea that God’s love is so strong that Jesus died to represent it is mind boggling for me. It also makes me very uncomfortable because it often represents a theology of sacrifice I actually don’t believe in. I believe Jesus died because people could not handle the love and grace he claimed and represented as God’s. But my confusion or discomfort is irrelevant in the face of God. God doesn’t ask us if love should be revealed. God does not ask our permission to have the person of Jesus represent him and ultimately die from the sin of humanity because we cannot handle such unconditional scandalous love.

It reminds me of a line I have been taught to use in a time with difficult children. And David Lose tells a story that fits perfectly into this context.

He wrote: “Tom's six year-old son Benjamin protested his bedtime. Frustrated by his father's refusal to budge, Benjamin finally became so frustrated that he said, "Daddy, I hate you!" Tom, possessing the presence of mind I wish I more frequently displayed, replied, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ben, but I love you."

To which Benjamin replied, "Don't say that!" Surprised, Tom continued, "Ben, but it's true – I love you." "Don't say that, Daddy." "But I love you, Ben." "Stop saying that, Daddy! Stop saying it right now!" And then it came: "Benjamin, now listen to me: I love you...like it or not!"

Even at six years old, you see, Benjamin realized that in the face of unconditional love he was powerless. If Tom had been willing to negotiate – "I'll love you *if* you go to bed nicely" – then Benjamin would be a player: "Okay, this time, but I'm not

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<sup>1</sup> Lose, David workingpreacher.org John 3 commentary

eating my vegetables at dinner tomorrow." But once Tom refused to negotiate, refused to make his love for his son conditional on something Benjamin did, then Ben couldn't do anything but accept or flee that love.

The same is true with us. If God makes God's great love for the world and us conditional, then we, suddenly, have tremendous power. We can negotiate. We can threaten to reject God's love. We can even tell God to take a hike if we don't care for God's terms. But when God just loves us – completely and unconditionally – and when God just goes and dies for us, well then the jig is up, there's just nothing we can do to influence God.

God in Jesus has made God's decision...and it is *for* us. Yes, we can run. But we can't change the fact that God loves us, that God in fact loves the whole world more than we can imagine."<sup>2</sup>

As we continue on this Soul journey the good but hard news is that we don't have all of the control. The spirit journey may lead us to places we never thought we would go. You may find yourself called to let something go that you have been holding onto way to long even though you know it's not good for you. You may find yourself being led down a new path of caring or service. You may find yourself discovering new opportunities in life. You may be called to walk in a different way. I believe more than ever that we as a congregation are being called to trust in God's promises. I believe we are being called to trust and faith in a way we have never been called before. We as a congregation have been blessed. And I would dare to say that like Abraham and many after him we too have been blessed that we might be a blessing. Together we are being called to ask I wonder where God is truly taking us. I wonder where we are to authentically go. And so as individuals and congregation I wonder how you'll wander in this next stage of the journey. Step into the light of God's blessing as you move with the spirit of Holy love.

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<sup>2</sup> Lose, David workingpreacher.org