

Second Sunday of Lent
February 17, 2008

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Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

Each week this Lenten season our Gospel lesson will be about an encounter with Jesus. And each week I will be trying to focus on one aspect of Christian life that can be drawn from that encounter. Last week Jesus was tested by Satan in the wilderness and the aspect of Christian life that was exemplified by Jesus was obedience.

This week we have an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Now, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, Jews who were extra careful to follow all the rules of the Laws of Moses. And apparently he was a leader of the Jews. That would indicate to me that he was probably very knowledgeable of the Scriptures, studied in the Law, all the rules and regulations that guided their lives. He probably had obedience down pat.

But here, in our text for today, we read that Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus at night, which by itself raises some questions, Does he not want anyone to know he went to talk with Jesus? And if not, why not?

At any rate, it doesn't appear that he has a specific question. I think he just wanted to know Jesus, to understand something about him better. And, at first, they appear to be talking to each other. But pretty quickly it starts to seem that they are not at all on the same page. Jesus is talking about being born of water and the Spirit, and Nicodemus is wondering about re-entering a mother's womb. What is going on here? And why are they so not connecting?

To get at that, I think we need to step back a little and take a look at a particular word, and variations on that word, that are used repeatedly in our New Testament texts for today. The word, in Greek, is *pisteuo*. It is translated in its noun form as faith; but, unfortunately (in my opinion), in its verb form it gets translated as believe. "Abraham believed God", "the God in whom he believed", and "whoever believes in him may have eternal life", etc. The problem is, over time, "believing" something has morphed into holding a belief. A belief is an idea, a concept, or maybe a principle. I might say that I believe that something is true, that some form of behavior is best, that some aspect of life is important.

The upshot of this believe/belief metamorphosis is that John 3:16 has become sort of the shorthand version of the idea or concept that a person supposedly has to profess to be true in order to be said to have faith, and then to be the recipient of the eternal life it refers to. I personally think that that is as far off track as Nicodemus' question about re-entering a mother's womb.

Faith is not about believing a belief. Faith, *pisteuo*, is about trust. We'd be better off if we just translated it trust everywhere, "Abraham trusted God", "for this reason it depends on trust", "whoever trusts in him may have eternal life." A person believes a doctrine, an intellectual proposition, maybe even a juicy bit of gossip. But trusting is different.

A person trusts someone, or something. I trust the steel and concrete, or perhaps the strength of steel and concrete every time I drive up over the High Five. I trust the integrity and hospitality of the chefs and waiters whenever I go out to eat. And I trust God's love and forgiveness as I live from day to day, doing the best I can, and trusting that there is a Being greater than myself who has a care for my well-being and the well-being of the world. I trust that this One also gives me second and third chances when I mess up.

Trust, then, is the aspect of Christian life that I see in this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is trying to understand the idea of being born again. How could it happen? How would that work? He was so caught up in understanding the idea that he wasn't open to the experience of a new life that was available through trusting God's love. He was still stuck in trusting his own adherence to the rules. Trusting God, trusting God's love, that would have entirely changed his rule-bound life; it would have given him a new life. One might even call it being born again. But that would have been a stretch.

It's still a stretch. Letting go of what we've always known and always trusted and trusting God instead isn't easy. And none of us do it perfectly. Which brings me to Abraham; and one of the passages from Paul where I most want to say to Paul, "Ahem, Paul, I beg to differ."

You see, in the Romans text, Paul is going on and on about the great faith of Abraham and what a great job Abraham did of trusting God. "Abraham believed (a.k.a. trusted) God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Etc., etc.

Well, let's look at that one a little closer. If we read Genesis 12:1 again, it says, "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.'" Leaving your country, your kindred, and your father's house pretty much means leave everything. God was pretty much telling him, "Leave your homeland, leave all your relatives and family, and while you are at it, leave behind your estate, everything you inherited from your father." That would be, well, basically, everything.

And, that is usually how it is represented in pictures in the Bible story books. Just little old Abraham and Sarah, taking off, trusting God to see them through. But, if you read on to just verse 5 we'll see that it says, "Abram took his wife Sarah, 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." So much for trusting God and leaving behind kindred and house.

But, that's kind of reassuring to me actually. It tells me that Abraham was probably a lot like all the rest of us. He was not a great faith hero. He was human just like us. But his limited faith, his limited capacity to trust God was enough. It was enough for God to work with. Maybe not complete, maybe not total, but enough for God to go about doing something new through him. And so it is with all the rest of us. Our faith, or capacity to trust God is only partial. And it almost seems that the more resources of our own that we start out with, the more limited is our capacity to trust God as we go. But still, it is enough for God to work with, it is enough for God to begin creating a new life in us. It's enough for us to be born again, by water and the Spirit.

And through the work of the Spirit, trust grows. Life happens, every time we open ourselves to God at work in our lives, every time we trust God's love, comfort, strength, we grow. And as we grow, the new life we have in that trusting becomes more and more evident to us.

We Christians have been arguing over beliefs and doctrines, the ideas and concepts with which we try to express what God did and does, for a couple millennia. Various ideas come and go in their prominence and favor. So obviously, those aren't what really matter. What really matters is trusting God, trusting God's love, compassion, mercy. Day in, and day out.

What matters is living life trusting that it doesn't all depend on you and your adherence to some set of rules or ideals. What matters is living life, trusting that a power greater than ourselves is afoot in the universe. What matters is trusting that there are purposes greater than our own of which we can be a part. What matters is trusting that that power, God, is first and foremost love. Love we can trust.

Let's leave the debate over the doctrines and details to someone else. Let us only trust in that love, live in that love, and love one another with a love like that love. Amen.