

(Genesis 12:1-4a NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." <sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

(John 3:1-17 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup> 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."

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> "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. <sup>17</sup> "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.

## Called into the Unknown

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: February 24, 2002

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Genesis 2:1-4a; John 3:1-17

There is an old expression about having the patience of Job. It's supposed to convey that if you have the patience of Job, you will be able to abide just about anything. Well, Job was patient only to a point, you may recall. When Job lost his belongings and his family, he was remarkably uncomplaining, it is true. But the devil was right about Job. As soon as Job was afflicted himself – covered with body sores and scraping his itching, burning flesh with a potsherd – then he howled in protest.

For my money, the paragon of patience in the Bible is Jesus. Jesus preached a message that was relatively easy to understand – not easy to do, mind you, but easy to understand. But almost everyone got it wrong.

His disciples wished that Jesus would lead a strong and bold social movement. They wanted him to be a winner. They wanted to be buddies with one who would come out on top. Peter looked him in the eye and said straight to his face, my savior doesn't go on a cross. Jesus was patient. Sure, he rebuked Peter, told him to get behind him, even called him Satan. But Jesus was patient enough to trust Peter with leading the church in its fragile infancy.

His opponents among the religious leaders betrayed even their own teachings, because he caused such fear in them. Look, he eats with the poor and the unworthy, the wrong kind of people. And yet their own texts told them to care for the widow and the stranger and the downtrodden. But Jesus was patient with them, too. He calmly reminded them that the physician was to tend the sick, not the well. He told them that the Sabbath was made for healing; God devised it as a balm, not a burden. He said that God searches doggedly for a lost soul, even if only one in a hundred is lost.

But in this morning's passage Jesus shows what I take to be the most remarkable restraint of all. Nicodemus willfully misunderstands what Jesus is saying to him. Jesus tells Nicodemus a deep and profound truth, but Nicodemus plays a game with it. He trivializes it. He makes sport of Jesus' words.

Now, to fully understand what I mean, you will need to learn a little Greek this morning. Actually, you need to learn only one word. So, for those of you who, like me, aren't very good at other languages, fear not. This won't be very taxing. In fact, it will be kind of fun.

The Greek word I want you to learn is *anōthen*. Here, you try it – *anōthen*. *Anōthen* is one of those words with several meanings. *Anōthen* means 'from above.' It also means 'anew.' And it means 'again.' *Anōthen* – from above, anew, again.

Okay, Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness. He comes to see what Jesus has to say. But he comes not with an open heart, but with an axe to grind, and a desire to belittle. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being

born anothren.” Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, or born anew, or born again.”

Jesus is clearly telling Nicodemus a poignant and sometimes very difficult truth. To attain the realm of God, most of us have to change at least some significant parts of ourselves or our lives. And Jesus chooses the word ‘anothen’ because it conveys not only that one must change, but that that change will result in new and renewed life. Born anew, we become new, and we become whole. Embedded in the assignment to change is the promise of new and fresh life.

And Jesus was also conveying that we are to reborn from above, that is, we are to be born of things of the spirit. Jesus was saying that mundane and worldly things obscured one’s vision of the realm of God. Remember what the devil tempted Jesus with? The devil tempted Jesus with all he wanted to eat at the snap of his fingers. He tempted Jesus with wealth beyond imagination. And he tempted Jesus with power and control over all the dominions of the earth. Jesus told the devil that these temptations were lies, and that he would not be enticed with sugar-coated, hollow illusions, which promised happiness, but ultimately delivered misery instead. Jesus was telling Nicodemus the same thing. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that the worldly lures of life on easy street, of wealth, and of power were deceptions, card tricks, sleights of hand. He was telling Nicodemus that to attain the realm of God, one must turn away from these idols of earthly delight and look to the hopes and values and possibilities which come from God, from the spirit, from above, if you will.

Jesus was telling Nicodemus something of profound importance. But it was something that, if Nicodemus were to listen to it, would shake the foundations of his existence. So Nicodemus made a choice. He made a choice to talk down, to belittle, to denigrate this most important gift that Jesus was trying to give to him. Nicodemus says, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus insists on the most literal meaning of what Jesus had told him, and thereby missed, no sidestepped, no trampled all over the point. Nicodemus trampled all over the point. Nicodemus ridiculed Jesus. Nicodemus intentionally and willfully misunderstood Jesus. And Nicodemus turned his back on Jesus and Jesus’ words, both of which which surely could have opened the realm of God to him. How sad the choice Nicodemus made.

\*\*\* Now, I don’t think it is too much of a stretch to say that many of us struggle with the same issues that are in the scene between Jesus and Nicodemus. And if I am right about that, then it will be well to understand why Nicodemus couldn’t bring himself to open his heart to what Jesus was telling him. It may be helpful to understand what was so hard for Nicodemus. For the same things may be hard for at least a few of us, too.

The first thing to say is that temptations are, well, tempting. We talk of tempting desserts, the temptation to cheat to get ahead. The devil banked on the idea that when he showed Jesus power, privilege, wealth and ease from that mountain top, Jesus would find them alluring, and he would fall hard for their siren song. After all, the devil had bought and continues to buy souls with offerings that are far less persuasive than those he had Jesus survey.

Temptation is enticing because it sends us craving. It takes dead aim at our most vulnerable propensities and delusions. Temptation promises us that satisfying our cravings will lead to happiness. If I have that new car, that good job, if I were rich, if the most beautiful

woman or the most handsome man would just but fall in love with me and sweep me off my feet. If the kids were better, or if I could just retire, or if, if, if. Nicodemus had some ifs, Nicodemus had some cravings that he was pretty sure Jesus was telling him would never bring him the realm of God – peace and happiness and spiritual well-being – Nicodemus was pretty sure Jesus was telling him his cravings wouldn't work, and he just couldn't tolerate letting go of them.

The story of Jesus and Nicodemus prompts us, then, to take an inventory, to take an inventory of those things that have such a strong grip on us that we cannot imagine letting them go. Janice Joplin sang, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." It sounds pretty negative. But she was onto something. I can't tell you how many people I know who have found freedom in failure, who have found that when they have lost all those things they thought would make them happy, when they have lost all those things they were sure they could not live happily without, they have experienced happiness and joy like none they could remember. So the question, then, is, what things are you holding onto so tightly that you can't let them go? What things are a craving for you? What things are betraying you by keeping you from answering Jesus' invitation? Come. Be born anew. Come. Be born from above. Come. And see the true well being that God has in store for you.

\*\*\* Oh yes, letting go of the things that hold us back is a huge part of the problem. Just about half I would say. The other half is about going forward. If letting go of the delusions that have hold of us is hard, so is taking the risk of going into uncharted territory. When Jesus tells Nicodemus to be born from above or born anew, he is telling him to head into places he has never been before.

In our reading from Genesis this journey into the unknown is a real land journey. Abram and his father before him heard God tell them to leave their home and their kindred and go to a land that God would show them. Reebee and Jennifer want us to get into contemporary worship. We could have computer projectors showing images up on a big screen to go along with the rest of worship. I wish I had that today. I wish I had a computer projector and a big screen. I would show you the trip God told Abraham and Sarah to go on. A trip with no maps and no real idea what lay before them. On foot they and their descendants wandered for hundreds of miles through the rugged terrain of present day Iraq and Turkey, Syria, Israel and Jordan, Saudia Arabia and Egypt, all at God's command. We know from their stories that the way was long and arduous. God's promises sometimes seemed to go unfulfilled. For instance, Abraham and Sarah, who were to be the progenitors of the chosen people, were childless into their old age before Isaac was born. The chosen people became a people in bondage under Pharaoh for many long years and generations before they ever crossed the Jordan.

But they went. They accepted God's invitation for the journey. Even though they knew not where they were headed, and even though the way looked long and demanding. Abraham and Sarah, in the words of our other story, were born anew, born from above. By faith they forged ahead.

This second story in a way asks us the opposite question from the first one. The story of Abraham and Sarah asks what is it that made this couple willing to leave behind the their home and kin and strike out on a journey into the unknown? What makes one person accept God's invitation and another turn his back and walk away?

Part of it, we know, is learning to let go of the things that would hold us back. But there

is more to it, too.

The other day the young daughter of one of our faculty members at the Divinity School was jumping off a high wall into her father's waiting arms. I stood watching for a moment, smiling. Part of the smile was remembering my own children when they were that age. And a part of the smile was awe, awe I had for the total trust Amanda had in her father. She would have jumped off the end of the earth into his waiting arms.

Abraham and Sarah went to the end of the earth, trusting all the way that God was leading them. I doubt they could have gone had they not had such trust. A child jumping from a wall is a relatively simple idea of trust. When you are Abraham and Sarah wandering half lost, old and beyond child bearing, or when you are Moses backed against the Red Sea, or you are Job on the ash heap, or you are the Puritans setting sail for a new promised land, or you are Martin Luther King in a Birmingham jail, or Mother Theresa on a street in Calcutta, or, or you are just yourself, trying as hard as you can to navigate a decent life – well, there are ups and downs. There are days when faith flags. There are when you swear at God. But in the end, just because living is more complicated than jumping off a wall, that faith, that trust that God is part of this journey, that trust God is leading the way, is all the more important, even if there are some days you are more certain of it than others.

Every person I know who has found their way through the wilderness has believed, as did the ancient Israelites, that they could count on a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day to guide them into the unknown. And God knows, they were right.

Nicodemus came by night to test Jesus. But Jesus offered him the realm of God. Too bad, Nicodemus could not let go of the mundane things that he thought he could not live without. He laughed in Jesus' face and willfully distorted the meaning of Jesus' words. Nicodemus stayed put in a rut that was going nowhere. Abraham and Sarah, however, found they could leave almost anything behind if they put their trust in God. They left home and family, and struck out on the adventure of a lifetime. And while the way wasn't easy, because they day by day were born anothen, born from above, born anew, their journey into the unknown turned out to be a journey to the realm of God.

May we all know such journeys as theirs. Amen.

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