

2nd Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.5.23

Genesis 12:1-4a

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. 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. 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." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 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?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "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. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "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. (486)

When I was a kid, I overheard a conversation between two adults. It was in church, my home church.

As you might guess, my home church turned out to be a formative place for me. A place where a lot of unimportant interactions happened all the time: people talking about things; people trying things, fixing things, rehearsing things, preparing things and cleaning up afterward: these together eventually mounted up to become utterly formative of me.

But isn't that often the way? It's easy to think it's the big things. It's the big things in life that shape us into who we are—a divorce here, an accident there, a cross-country move, an enormous accomplishment that opened a thousand doors. In my experience, it's more all the little things, frequent, ordinary, reliable things.

But maybe it's that mostly little things happened to me.

This conversation between two adults: I have no idea why it's stayed with me. Two men, one was Bill, my pastor; the other was Dave, a lay leader. In the choir, on the parish council, an eager participant of adult education series, he'd found his place in church.

They were talking about the Bible, which wasn't always the case, by the way. We *do* talk about other things in church. We are allowed to. It's not just the Bible all the time.

Dave said of it, "I like to think of it as an instruction manual."

Bill demurred, a gentle disagreement or an unspoken un-endorsing. My pastor didn't agree with that.

In retrospect, it's unlikely Dave had ever really read the Bible—which is no sleight against Dave. Most people haven't. Any why should they? Why should you? The Bible wasn't written and compiled to be a book that one would then read silently, alone, how most reading is done these days. The Bible was a book for public hearing and communal interpreting. For starters, most people couldn't read for most of the Bible's long life amidst human history. Plus, it's a *tough* book. It's not plainly intelligible, in spite of what so-called literalists might insist.

No, Dave's thinking the Bible is an instruction manual was likely due to the fact that he'd mostly heard it in church, piecemeal, in little chunks sometimes called "lessons," though I think this is a reductive way to think of what we hear read in church. I tend to call them readings.

The Bible as an instruction manual...? Mmmm, kind of...?

Nicodemus would likely have thought so, or would maybe have.

He'd have had a different Bible than we do, of course. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which means he'd have known his Bible well, a library of books that included all that we call the Old Testament, and also some apocryphal books that you'd now see in a Catholic Old Testament or in a study Bible in a section between the Old and New Testaments called the Apocrypha. They're not quite authoritative, according to Protestant tradition. Martin Luther removed them from the canon, during the pivot-point in western history, the Protestant Reformation. Luther tossed a handful of books out in a move of pique that would be unthinkable today.

It was unthinkable then, too, but he did it anyway, and it got him into a lot of trouble.

Nicodemus had a different Bible than we do, but with a lot of overlap, and with a greater predominance of instructions. The Law, the Torah: there are a lot of commandments in there. We think of those first ten, the so-called Ten Commandments. But for Jews, then and now, there are 613 commandments, all to be obeyed, though the question of how is always a live one—which is where the life of Judaism happens, in the question of how and then also why.

Nicodemus: not only did he perhaps think of the Bible as an instruction manual, but he also moreover knew the instructions well, and knew how to follow them, and had likely nearly always followed them, and now, as a Pharisee, helped others follow them—which, incidentally, was a matter of life and death.

Following the law: it's a matter of life and death. After all, it's by such a thing as a commonly held law that people can together live and thrive—which is the only way to live and thrive, *together*. There really is no way to do this alone, in spite of what we might manage to live as if these days. But to do it together means also to have common terms, common assumptions and understandings and practices, a common *way*.

Nicodemus was one who helped make clear and keep enforced the commonly held way.

And it's true: this way had become something of a thicket. No longer so clear, so laid out so to be walked plain, it was something of a tangle, regulations that played out at cross purposes with themselves. Government can become that, eventually. The governing of a people can become a thicket of absurdities, byzantine, Kafkaesque. There's a reason we have such descriptors as these, from ancient times to modern.

I remember once having to fill out a government form for one of my kids. Was I applying for a passport? Something strict, something with no room for play. I had to fill in the name of the person, exactly as it appears on other forms—birth certificate, social security card. There must be no deviation. It must be filled in letter by letter into those little individual blocks.

The thing is, there weren't enough blocks for all the letters for the correct name.

Now what was I supposed to do?

Call a Pharisee, is what an Israelite, what a Judean would have done.

Nicodemus knew. He would definitely have known. He'd have known how to do this so to live as God intended, so to live according to God's very clear instructions.

But now had come this one who seems to have blown all that up.

This one: who was he, and what was he up to, and on what authority was he up to it?

“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.”

He had come by night, Nicodemus had; which suggests he knew it wasn't right that he should seek Jesus out. It also suggests he came in earnest, perhaps even in urgency.

Which isn't always the case, of course. Many are the encounters Jesus had with others that seem to be pretense or performance. People trolling him, people confronting him to “test” him,

though often with glib and oily respect. “Teacher,” they will say in flattery before trying to flatten him with superior thinking.

It usually didn’t work out that way. Jesus had a way of not falling for it, of not submitting to another’s framing of things, which would himself to be framed.

Nicodemus seemed different in this way. He needed secrecy for this questioning because it wasn’t to trounce Jesus or to trap him or to box him in. It was something more of urgency for him, something perhaps even more of crisis. He had to *know*.

I feel for him. The way of life that had held him all his life, that had held the people whom he loved and served, held them for as long as anyone could remember and even longer: it seemed to be suddenly in question with this one. Jesus didn’t adhere to this way. Though he came from this people, he didn’t adhere to their way.

I get that terrible feeling that the familiar might be slipping away, the long frame that held and supported might be fading, vanishing, come to seem like so much absurdity.

And yet he seemed himself to be of God, this one: to have authority, unmistakable authority. All these signs! Miraculous things, works of creation or re-creation, works of repair and restoration. It’s as if here was someone who actually had the power to get to the root of things, the root of the problem of things.

All these things of life that make a common law essential, all these clashes in life, these zero-sum impossibilities that make for stumbling in life, that make for conflict, even deadly conflict: that we misunderstand, that we confuse and misjudge, that we hoard the goods of life because we fear there otherwise won’t be enough for us, that we grasp after power because we might instead be vulnerable to exploitation: all these almost-but-not-quitely of life that make good order always at risk without clear law: Jesus seemed to have some strange power to transcend these hooks and snares, to lessen by grace their power to rip and tear. It’s as if Jesus didn’t need the law, as if with Jesus there was no need of “don’t do that” and “cut that out” because...why?

Because with him the good and right had powerful appeal?

There was no room for ambivalence, that sneaking wearer away of things?

Maybe that’s it?

Nicodemus had to know.

And he didn’t quite get it at first. Quite the literalist, he had little room in his thinking for the wilding Holy Spirit. He had little room in his functioning, in his faithful adherence to the law (which is surely obedience to the will of God, right?) for something as unmanageable as the Spirit,

which was like the wind in how it functioned. Where did it come from? Where did it go? Whatever: it certainly wasn't a result of willpower, still less of human willpower. It operated utterly irrespective of the frames that had been forged to hold the people of God and to give shape and form to their life together. I mean, maybe the Spirit of God would show up in their practice, and maybe even because of their practice. But maybe it wouldn't. Worse, maybe it would show up in some place totally foreign to their practice, among some people long thought to be utterly beyond hope for such a thing as the presence of God.

And this might mean, maybe, that they should be prepared to venture beyond their practice, beyond even their people, at least from time to time...?

Like old Abram. He who would become Abraham. He lived in Ur, that near oldest city in the world. He was settled there, with his wife Sarai and their household and livestock and household gods. Until one day, a voice came with a notion that had just moments before and since time immemorial been unthinkable. "Leave. Leave this place, go somewhere else. Don't worry about where. That will come later. Just know that, wherever you go, wherever it might be where you end up, there will be this voice, this promise, this eventual manifestation: you will be the father of a great nation, and Sarai will be the mother, and through you all the families of the all the world will be blessed.

All the world! All the world? This would be about all the world? Which God so loves that the one who has come has been given—for all the world? Making it so now, or eventually, there might be countless frames and forms blessed for gathering in God's presence, and moreover there will be no outsiders for there will be no people and no place beyond God's loving embrace.

Nicodemus was being called out no less than Abram was called out, back in the day, *way* back in the day.

And who knows if he would do it, poor, confused, pressed upon Nicodemus? The story doesn't indicate. True to form in the Gospel of John, this encounter gives cause for some sign from Jesus or some speaking from Jesus, and never returns to the original cause. This is because we're more the point in the Gospel of John. The story recounted in this gospel version is less about having continuity and intelligibility as a story per se and more about provoking the hearers of this gospel, down through time, to a belief in Jesus as truly come from God.

Nicodemus is actually not the story's concern.

So, who knows whether he would do it? This total turning on its head and turning inside out of all that he had known and long trusted as the actual right way. Let the wind be his guide,

open himself up to this arrival of some Spirit that can't be called upon on a schedule but is to be waited on like a birth. I mean, you know sort of when it will happen. Nine months, forty weeks. But as to exactly when? That's really not up to you.

Who knows whether Nicodemus could allow himself to become less Pharisee, more midwife, or even more expectant to-be-mother?

What we do know is that Nicodemus shows up two more times in this gospel. It was he who squared off with some other Pharisees when they expressed anger at the Temple police for not arresting Jesus when they had the chance. He reminded them, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" It was he also who came to the cross along with Joseph of Arimathea to help cut Jesus' dead, broken body down and to prepare it for burial. So perhaps it was that Nicodemus obeyed the un-commandment of being born of the Spirit—carried into new life as if on the wind.

As for us?

It's not news to any of you, I imagine, that things are changing.

They always are, of course. In fact, this is the basic point I've always landed on in preaching these two texts on this 2nd Sunday of Lent in Year A, which I've done as an ordained pastor eight times now. This, apparently, is always a relevant message. Funny, the lesson of these paired lessons is to look less for lessons, to seek instead a Spirit whose obedience to our lessons cannot be counted on—except, apparently, ironically, in the case of this lesson.

But the pandemic.

Always the pandemic.

This sped up the rate of change so trends we thought we'd be riding for a few decades became disruptions that arrived on our doorsteps while we were locked away inside.

I don't know what's to become of all our many human endeavors for making life together good, or at least better in accordance with the will of God. Many will remain, sustain, nearly unchanged. More will be changed, and even a few utterly transformed.

What I do know, what I *trust*, is the Holy Spirit, who was never as static as our contented state of things might have made it seem.

You know, the climactic event of Jesus' earthly ministry according to this gospel narrative is when Lazarus, who has died, was buried in his tomb. Four days dead, until Jesus arrives. He says to dead Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out." A calling out from being tucked away.

What's out there, do you imagine?

Thanks be to God.