

Go From Your Country

Scriptures: Gen. 12:1-4; John 3:1-18

Go From Your Country

When you spend time in Holy Scripture, you find that God tells His people to sometimes do some pretty unconventional, unexpected things. For example, in the Old Testament lesson this morning, we heard God tell Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you,” (Gen. 12:1). In ancient times, such a thing was unheard of. The only reason people moved in those days was generally to escape war or food shortages. They stayed together in family clans for protection and lived mostly in tents and temporary dwellings.

The Bible tells us that Abram came from Ur of the Chaldeans. That was an ancient city in modern-day Iraq. In that city, most of the buildings were made of stone and clay bricks – they built apartment building type structures for their people to live in. According to a National Geographic article I read, the government of Ur micromanaged everything – it was the original Soviet Union! The town covered an area about the size of Port Jefferson, and had 60,000 inhabitants. Even with high-rise apartment buildings, I can’t imagine packing 60,000 people into an area the size of Port Jefferson, but apparently they knew how to do it. I suspect they didn’t have to worry about mowing any grass! Doesn’t sound like the kind of place I’d like to live. Anyhow, God tells Abram to pack his bags, and set out on a journey to a far country. And Abram listened. He did what the Lord told him to do.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we’re going to hear Jesus tell Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee and member of the Jewish Sanhedrin or High Council, some pretty unconventional, and unexpected stuff. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy turn with me to John 3:1-18. **Read John 3:1-18.**

Nick at Nite

Back when Kayleigh and Hunter were little, they used to watch a lot of shows on the Nickelodeon cable channel. In the evenings, the network would switch over to “Nick at Nite,” and feature older cartoons and shows, like Dennis the Menace. Nick at Nite fits our Gospel story this morning. Nicodemus is an interesting person who shows up in the Gospel narrative. He shows up cloaked in darkness, only coming to visit Jesus at night. John tells us, “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know You are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs You are doing if God were not with Him,’” (John 3:1-2).

See friends, don't ever think they didn't know who Jesus was. Nick and the other Pharisees knew very well that Jesus had come from God – Nicodemus tells us as much with his statement. The Pharisees just didn't like that He wasn't rubbing elbows with them. I can picture the controversy in my mind. In a way, it's almost laughable. I imagine it was almost like something Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man were carrying on about in that old movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, as they wander through the forest, saying, "Lions, and Tigers, and Bears, oh my!" Look who Jesus spends the majority of His time with: Tax collectors, and lepers, and prostitutes, oh my!

We sanitize Jesus in the Church. People today don't like hearing that Jesus broke bread with "sinners," and let sinful, sin-filled people touch Him. He's God, after all. And God is holy. There's a great disconnect in our American view of theology between the holy righteousness of God, and the unmerited, undeserved grace of God poured out through Jesus' blood – I'll come back to this in a few minutes. Nick and the other Pharisees, they expect Jesus to be a religious, righteous, holy Man who acts and treats people just the same way they do. That hasn't changed, either, because friends, when God doesn't do the things we expect Him to do for us, or to do things our way, or have brothers and sisters do things our way, we get pretty hot under the collar. We get angry at God. We hurt others. So here's Nick at Nite, because he doesn't want any of his Pharisee friends to even know that he's come out to talk with Jesus – he doesn't want to be "guilty by association." Not yet, anyhow – we'll talk more about his transformation during Holy Week.

Be Born Again

Anyhow, Jesus had some interesting and shocking news for old Nicodemus. "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again," (verse 3). Well, as you can imagine, Nicodemus was floored. He'd never heard of such a thing before. "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" (verse 4). See, Jesus is trying to tell Nicodemus how we have to allow the presence of God's own Holy Spirit to come in and clean us up, using very basic, very human terms of birth. And the analogy flies right over Nicodemus' head.

Back during the Covid-19 shutdown, I heard a lot of talk about people being sheep. Do you remember hearing that? They were using it in a negative sense, and I suppose in a way it is. Sheep are pretty dumb. And, so often we're like that, too. We're dumb. We're oblivious. I'll own it – I'll readily admit I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed. Things people tell me often fly over my head. It isn't until they get blunt and to the point that things finally start to click. Well, we haven't changed much since Bible times! Jesus gets right to the point with Nicodemus. He says, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit," (verses 5-6).

The next thing Jesus says, applies to us today as much as it did to Nicodemus on that night long ago. “You should not be surprised at My saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit,” (verses 7-8). The Holy Spirit, Sovereign God, must be allowed by us to be sovereign of our heart. Some of you have been on a Walk to Emmaus before. They show you that picture of Jesus knocking on the door – we have it back in the Chapel. It’s the door of our hearts. You can’t see the door handle. I mean, I know, we see the door hinges, Jesus is standing in front of the door knob – He’s not trying to open the door, though. He’s just knocking. Knocking. He’s waiting for us to let Him come in and be King of us.

How Can This Be?

He wants the absolute best for us, so He gives us Himself. It’s so simple, but when we’re lost in the darkness, it’s so hard to understand. “‘How can this be?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘You are Israel’s teacher,’ said Jesus, ‘and do you not understand these things?’” (verses 9-10). When we’re only focused on doing things our way, doing things the same way we’ve always done them, we fall into a pattern of behavior – and sometimes that’s detrimental to our spiritual well-being. The Pharisees followed all the rituals. They said all the right prayers. Gave huge offerings at all the right times. But church, He’s not in their hearts.

Jesus very clearly reveals to Nicodemus that night who He is, and even what His mission will be. Jesus says, “We speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony,” (verse 11). He’s talking about Himself, and us, by extension – all people who follow Him. Jesus uses what we call in English “the royal we, or majestic plural.” It’s a way of talking about oneself, usually used by kings. It makes sense for Jesus to use it to talk of Himself as a Person of the Triune God.

He goes on. “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the One who came from heaven – the Son of Man,” (verses 12-13). He’s telling Nicodemus here where He came from. He laid His glory aside to come down for our sakes. It is remarkable! I am overwhelmed when I think about this. Last Tuesday night I drove out here pretty late, to grab a book to look at for an Adult Bible Study group on Wednesday night. It’s a modern-day study on John Wesley’s *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. On the way out, I saw Venus and Jupiter in the western sky. Two bright yellowy glimmering specks in an otherwise dark sky. The Creation we’ve been blessed with by our glorious God is breathtaking. To think that He made an unlimited number of stars with an infinite number of glittering planets revolving around them, but is still mindful of me – of you – it’s humbling and comforting. He loves us!

Nehushtan the Bronze Snake

Next Jesus tells Nicodemus where He's going to go. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life," (verses 14-15). When Jesus mentions Moses and the snake, Nicodemus knows exactly what He's talking about. To understand it, you have to go clear back to Numbers 21:

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!' Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived. (verses 4-9).

Later on, it was even given a name, Nehushtan (2 Kings 18:4). See, those ancient Israelites, messed up, and they complained a lot. We do that occasionally as well. The food they detested was manna, the bread from heaven. That's what we call Jesus. The Bread of Life. He's the Bread from heaven. Momentarily, we'll receive again that spiritual food that He alone gives us. The bronze snake on the pole saved the lives of those who had been bitten by poisonous snakes, just by looking at it. We've been bitten by the poisonous snake of sin and death, and when we look to Jesus on the cross, if we let Him, He saves our lives, not just now, but into eternity!

The most famous Bible verse is the next thing Jesus tells Nicodemus, and you and me today. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life," (John 3:16). That's a promise – if you believe in Jesus Christ and what He did for you on Good Friday's cross that He laid His life down as a sin offering for yours – He promises that we will have eternal life in, and with, Him. What a promise we have today, church! It's a reason to celebrate. "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" (2 Cor. 9:15).

We Condemn Ourselves

I'm almost done. One last point I want to make here with something Jesus says is this. It hit me the other week while doing the journaling we've been doing in the Adult Sunday School class. Jan thank you for that. If I hadn't picked that up when we started it back in November, I wouldn't be where I am today. These last few months have been challenging in life, within the local church, and the Church, at large. Thank you for your willingness to lead that class, to show us the process of journaling the Scriptures, and continuing to mentor and teach. You're helping me in ways you don't even realize. All

of you are. You all help me to be not just a better pastor, but a better human being, and a more faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus closes by saying this in our text this morning, and it's a wake-up call. He says, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's One and only Son," (John 3:17-18). See, we hear many people say things like, "God's going to send me to Hell." That's that flawed theology I mentioned earlier. God doesn't do that. He doesn't condemn us. He loves us! He knows our flaws and shortcomings, and that we need help. So He helps us by sending Jesus to take our place.

The idea of someone being sent to Hell, that's messed up. It's not right. God, Jesus doesn't do that. We send ourselves there. The condemnation doesn't come from God, it comes from us. Condemnation comes from us not believing that Jesus is who He says He is, that He's done what He's told us He's going to do, or our own unwillingness to open the door and let the Sovereign God be King of us. Like that picture – He's knocking at the door. Are you going to let Him in so He can help clean things up, or are you leaving Him standing out there, while you grope around in the dark trying to fix things all on your own?

Prayer: God of amazing compassion, Lover of our wayward race: You bring to birth a pilgrim people, and call us to be a blessing for ourselves and all the world. We pray for grace to take Your generous gift and step with courage on this holy path, confident in the radiant life that is Your plan for us, made known and given in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.