

<Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121:1-8; John 3:1-17>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Steve and Melissa - not their real names - found themselves living the life they had long imagined and dreamed of the life they had hoped for and worked to build. It was a modest life, certainly not making newspaper headlines or highlighted in any other way, but it was their life, and it was the one they wanted. They both had jobs which fulfilled them on personal and professional levels, they owned a comfortable home in a neighborhood they liked, and their young daughter was their daily joy. In short, even if it was a modest dream, it was their dream, and they were more than content. They were living their story as they always imagined it would be.

As time went on, however, life does what it always does: it changes. As their daughter grew into the teen years, Steve started to notice worrying signs beyond the expected dynamics of teenage rebellion and the discomfort of a hormone-filled young girl figuring out who she was. More and more, some of their daughter's decisions began to worry Steve, and when this was compounded by the discovery of drugs hidden in her closet, Steve and Melissa found themselves facing the hard discussion that few parents ever want to have: how to comfort, guide, and love their daughter in a difficult period. Their daughter's life was beginning to tell a different story, and for Steve and Melissa, it was turning into a horror story. As Steve lay awake in the middle of the night, he realized he, his daughter, and his family needed a new story.

In the middle of the night, laying awake, Nicodemus needed a new story. There is some speculation mixed in with this, but it is educated speculation and informed through our understandings of culture and religion on the time. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, as we're told from the outset, a leader of the Jews. We can safely surmise that he carries with him all the cultural and historical understandings of the Pharisees of the time. He represents and perhaps even embodies the Pharisaic views on the Temple, on proper worship of God, of right living of the communities of God's people. And with all of that, we can surmise that he shares the perspective of his fellow Pharisees regarding Jesus and his teachings.

But Nicodemus has questions, too, questions he is unsure how to answer and perhaps even how to address. And more than that, Nicodemus has expectations to live up to and an image to preserve. So, he comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, a time for quiet and unnoticed conversations. He comes to Jesus with his questions but first with a confession, an acknowledgment that we don't often see lifted up in the Gospel writings: "We know that you, Jesus, are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." And then Nicodemus is offered a new story that he doesn't quite know how to process: that a person, in order to know the Kingdom of God, must be born anew. Or, more directly translated, "born from above."

I can't tell you the hours upon hours, and pages upon pages of commentary that has been written, debated, and discussed on the meaning and interpretation of these verses. As we see in our reading, it all begins with Nicodemus asking his question, and in many ways, we continue to echo and discuss that, ourselves. What does it mean to be born from above? Or born anew? Or born of the Spirit? And I think that an unfortunate side effect of all of our debate and discussion and commentary is that we overlook something key that Jesus is offering: the tangible and connected offer of a new story.

Steve, in his midnight wakefulness, spent time researching what might be done to reconnect with their daughter, and what new story might be written, and how. Ultimately, he came upon an organization that builds orphanages around the world. And without consulting his wife or daughter - both of which he later acknowledged was a mistake - Steve signed them up to go and do just that.

Logistical and family communication mistakes aside, Steve realized that his family - his daughter, he and his wife as parents, and even he himself - needed a different story. A better and more connected story. A more tangible and embodied story. They needed a story that was imbued by and created within the Spirit, even if they didn't use that language. It is the same story that Nicodemus needed, as he sought out Jesus - a teacher come from God - in the middle of the night. And in many ways, as we continue through this Lenten season, it is the story that we need, as well. The problem is, this is still a scary story. Not scary in the manner of horror, but scary in the magnitude of what it might ask of us which is, when it comes down to it, everything.

The story we yearn for, the story which God both offers and asks of us, will ask everything of us. But we should not be surprised by this. We can look all the way back to Abram and Sarai, before they were Abraham and Sarah, and see that the story of God, the story which gives our lives and our community of faith so much meaning, is a story which will ask everything of us. And that can be terrifying.

I can only imagine the response that Abram must have had when he heard God speak to him, saying, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." That's it. That's the command. Simply, "go" and with it, 'don't stop until I tell you to.'

I don't know about you, but that would terrify even me, and I have spent much of my life practicing the faithful response of following where God leads. And if I think about it too much with my head, if I try to dissect and understand and rationalize it, I would be terrified, indeed. Perhaps even paralyzed by fear. Nicodemus even gets hung up on trying to mentally understand. But this is not a story for our heads alone. This is a story born of the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of God is that which embodies this story within us, making it tangible, making it possible. Jesus even moves it from the rationalizing mind to the embodied person, stating that the person must be born again; to live into the story of God is to be an embodied part of that story.

Thankfully, the invitation to this story of God is still embodied within our lives, within our community of faith, on a regular bases. Every time we come again to the Table of our Lord, we connect to and participate in the tangible, embodied story of God's presence in our lives, in our world, in our history and for our future. During a meal which was both ordinary and extraordinary - ordinary because it consisted of little more than bread and cup; extraordinary because the Passover meal told the story of God's presence in their history and reminded them of God's nearness - in such a meal, Jesus again invites the disciples, invites us, to be born anew. In this meal, Jesus connects the story of faith to the physical world around us, regular bread and juice, which now also become so much more: the bread becomes Jesus' body, broken to heal the world; the cup becomes Jesus' blood, shed for the world's redemption. As we gather at this Table, we not only proclaim this story from our history but we embody and live into this story for our future.

The call of such a new story is not just a call to give up everything, it is also the promise to receive everything. Just as God commands Abram to "go," God also provides the promise of what is to come: a land on which to settle and live, descendants with which to form his family and be connected, and undergirding all of it, the promise of God to be near. To be imminent. To be embodied. To follow God's command is to live into God's story of presence.

Steve and Melissa introduced a new story, though it was initially met with resistance. But then their daughter came to them and asked if they could go to a particular place to build the orphanage. That she felt a connection and wanted to share it with her friends. Like Abram, and Sarai, and Lot, heeding the call to go and living into the promise it offered, they went. And through this new story, their family healed, and they embodied a new reality born of the Spirit.

Nicodemus received a new story. Later in John's gospel, at the crucifixion, it will be Nicodemus who helps to take Jesus from the cross and prepare him for burial, bearing witness with his own life to the story Jesus has embodied in the world.

Being born of the Spirit is less about some mystical new birth, though it is a mystery and, in the Spirit of God, many such things happen. But for us in this Lenten season, it is also the movement to be open to God's bigger story, God's more compelling story, unfolding before us. Furthermore, it is our willingness to make the difficult decision, the sacrificial decision, to say yes to God's story and set aside the story we thought we had already claimed. And the promise of God's new story, God's embodied nearness, awaits us, too. Let us continue to live into that promise, into that story. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*