

Second Sunday of Lent  
March 8, 2020  
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Genesis 12:1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17  
John 3:1-7

Once upon a time, back when Abraham was just Abram, and Sarah was still Sarai, they had settled down. Once upon a time, they lived in Canaan, the land Abram's father settled, and place where he lived, the land he died and was buried.

But then God came along and *un*-settled everything:

*"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you ..."*

Sure, God promises a lot in those next few verses. But the cost is clear. Abram and Sarai, and Abram's nephew Lot, will have to leave behind all that they have known – the familiar landscape, the friends and family who remain. They will become unsettled.

Which sets the stage nicely for this morning's gospel.

Once upon a time, a man named Nicodemus came to Jesus, imagining that Jesus could settle a few things for him. But if Nicodemus had been paying attention to the stories of his own tradition (the story of the call of Abram and Sarai for starters), and if, as he says, he really thought that Jesus had truly "come from God," he might have predicted he would not leave feeling more settled. For the ways of God have more often been deeply unsettling, perhaps especially for those who long for reassuring answers that settle things for us.

No, Nicodemus might not have come calling if he'd have anticipated the outcome, for Jesus tells him a thing or two – or three! – that would have been surprising to him. And unsettling.

The first is this, of course:

*"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."*

Or, as the more evangelical translations put it, "You must be born again." It has become the litmus test of Christian identity for some. We don't hear the words as especially unsettling, of course; we've grown up with these words.

Ironically to my mind, many modern Christians hear this as a premise that settles the question of who gets into heaven and who's left out. Ironically, I say, for Jesus' answer settled nothing at all for Nicodemus. To the contrary, Jesus' answer seems deeply *un*-settling for him. And if we aren't hearing them as unsettling now, then we aren't hearing them as Jesus intends.

Word play and double-meanings run throughout the Gospel of John. And they come to the fore for us this morning. When Jesus speaks of being born “from above,” it could mean something else. It could be translated “born again” or “born anew.” None of those translations are wrong, though none of them probably adequate; it’s not just one or another, it’s all of them.

So it’s possible Nicodemus was genuinely confused by the word play.

But I don’t think so. I don’t think anyone would have thought to take Jesus’ words quite so literally, especially a learned man like Nicodemus. I don’t think he’s confused; I think he understands the point from the start. I think he’s simply squirming. I think he’s buying time. He’s trying to figure out a way not to have to give up all that’s he’s worked hard for all his life.

And he gives us the key insight into why he finds it so challenging in his response to Jesus. He’s not merely objecting to the idea of being born a second time, but of being born “after having grown old” (emphasis added).

Nicodemus had spent his life as a rabbi, a learner, a scholar. And now, in his old age, Jesus tells him that none of what he has spent his whole long life “counts for squat” when it comes to God. Jesus seems to be saying that everything he has spent his life on, all the questions he’s been asking and all the answers he’s been settling on, have lost him to the mysterious ways in which God moves in this world.

That response of Jesus in John this morning is not so very different from the stories told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke – in which the disciples are chastised by Jesus. I think, in particular, of those times when people bring children to Jesus and the disciples try to keep the children away, but Jesus says to bring the children, for it is to children that kingdom belongs. Or those times when the disciples argue about who’s the greatest, and Jesus rebukes them saying that only children will find a home in the kingdom.

This past week, a friend of mine posted a little snippet of a video from her granddaughter’s birthday party. (I wish you could see it, but alas I can only describe it.)

My friend’s granddaughter, little Maeve, just turned four. And apparently she wanted to be a princess for her birthday party, so there she is dressed in a frilly dress with a tiara. And she’s joined by a bunch of other four-year-old girls in their frilly dresses, wearing their tiaras. And Maeve is smiling such a beautiful smile. She’s smiling and she’s grinning.

And it’s a video, so we can see everyone hopping up and down out of excitement, and we can hear Maeve laughing and giggling. And squealing. And all the other little girls with her.

And they sing! They sing “Happy Birthday” to her. And it’s amazing to realize they know the song by heart. They’re only four, but they know that song and they sing it. But not like adults. It’s not a dirge; it’s a song of celebration. “You’re four, Maeve!! You’re four!! Happy Birthday!!”

Coming back to this morning's gospel, I think Jesus looks at Nicodemus and says, in essence, "You've become so serious. You've lost any joy in life. When did life become so dead for you?"

Elsewhere, you may recall, Jesus says, "I came that you might have life. And have it abundantly!"

I think Jesus is saying that Nicodemus has forgotten – and what's worse, forgotten that he's forgotten – what was always most fundamental about himself and every other child of God: that we come from God and live in God, that all is holy and everything's a gift.

Nicodemus aspires to mastery of all things spiritual, but Jesus is reminding him of the wonder of mystery.

Jesus goes on to talk about how the wind blows where it will. It's part of his way of telling Nicodemus that if he's come looking answers that settle things neatly, he's out of luck. Jesus insists on the essential freedom of God, one that resists any and all of our attempt to demonstrate our mastery of the same.

There's more word play going on here, by the way. But it's not the rhetorical style of Jesus. Rather, it's built into the languages of the Bible: Hebrew in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament. In both biblical languages, whether *ruah* in Hebrew or *pneuma* in Greek, the word we translate as our English word "spirit" could be translated as "wind" or as "breath."

The decision to translate the biblical word into a specific English word is a matter of interpretation. And whichever word is chosen by a translator isn't wrong, but it's never adequate. Whenever we read one of these words in the Bible – whether it's "spirit" or "wind" or "breath" – the other English words always pertain, and we'd do well to consider them, even to try and mix them up. It's a spiritual exercise you could employ whenever reading the Bible.

And this morning ... what if we stayed with "wind"? If so, this is what Jesus is saying:

*Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Wind. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Wind is wind. 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 Wind.*

For my part, I rather like wind in this case. It hints at the essential freedom of God to be God and the inherited freedom of God's children.

We are children of the Wind. (It says so in the Bible.)

If, instead, we think of “breath,” we might go back to the opening stories of the Bible about creation. From Genesis 1, we hear that the “breath of God” moved over the face of the deep. And day by day, God speaks and creation bursts forth. And day by day, God pronounces it “good.” And “good.” And “good.” And “good.” And “good.” And “very good.”

Creation – *kosmos* is the Greek word – is good ... is *very* good. Jesus reminds us of as much in those final verses this morning. God loves the world, the cosmos, he says. Jesus says he’s come not to criticize or condemn it, but to make the cosmos whole again.

That’s Genesis, chapter one.

In the second chapter of Genesis (that other story of creation), God shapes a mud creature out of the earth, but it lies there inert – until God bends over it and breathes into its nostrils to create life. And that’s why every “breath” we take – from our first to our very last – is a “spiritual” act. And every living, breathing creature is a miracle.

Nicodemus ... “a teacher of Israel,” as Jesus refers to him, is the sort of person who ought to “understand these things.”

Once upon a time, Nicodemus came to Jesus hoping Jesus could settle a few things for him.

But Jesus never settled for so little; he never settled for settling the minor details. Jesus came to shake things loose for a full life – for one and for all.

Jesus gave Nicodemus more than he asked for that day. He invited him – as he invites us still – to live as a child of God, to be born of the wind, the holy breath, the Spirit of God. And not to settle for anything less than the mystery of being fully alive.