

Second Weekend in Lent (RCL/A): "Go Find Your Authentic Self"
Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17
March 7-8, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

When Holy Trinity couples are getting ready for their wedding and marriage, they fill out a premarital inventory. The results come back with a personality profile, comparing and contrasting various parts of their personalities like openness or resistance to change. One person may cherish the familiar, while the other may be energized by newness. I tend toward cherishing the familiar, so I admire people who are always up for a new adventure, always ready to turn over a new leaf, unafraid of entering unknown territory!

I don't know what Abraham & Sarah's personality profile would have looked like early on in their relationship. We can't know if they were natural homebodies or globetrotters, whether they were the same or different. What we **do** know is that in today's first lesson from Genesis, God abruptly calls them to pick up stakes, leave everything they know and head out to places unknown.

The LORD said... "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1)

A Jewish friend of mine, Dr. Barbara Rosoff, has taught me that those first words God speaks to Abram are **very important**. In Hebrew they are *Lech L'cha*, which can literally be translated "Betake yourself." Midrash is ancient, creative, wise, thought-provoking commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures that has been passed down for almost 2,000 years. Midrash says that what God is saying to Abram & Sarai (their names haven't even been changed yet to Abraham & Sarah) is this:

"Go forth to find your authentic self, to learn who you are meant to be."

Authentic is **real**, right? To be our authentic self is to be our **true** self, our **sincere**, **honest** self. It's to be who we are as God made us. It's to show up without the psychic armor we put on to protect ourselves, the spiritual makeup we apply to hide our imperfections, the psychological smoke screen we throw up to prevent people from seeing who we **really** are, because we're afraid who we are is so unacceptable we will be rejected.

Now, we'd assume Nicodemus who shows up in today's Gospel would be a self-assured kind of guy. He's a Pharisee, someone who prided himself on both **knowing** and **keeping all** of God's commands: not just the 10 we know, but the 613 that had popped up by Jesus' time. Plus, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was a little like the Jewish Supreme Court. He had power, he had authority, he had the respect of others. He was a spiritual heavy.

And yet – he comes to Jesus under cover of darkness, like a spiritual cat burglar. Some say, “Well, it **was** tradition to burn the midnight oil studying Scripture.... “ But realistically, Nicodemus was part of the Establishment and Jesus was NOT. Nicodemus was on a spiritual fact-finding mission. He hadn't committed yet. He still wasn't sure about this rabbi from the backwater of Galilee. He didn't want to go public with his curiosity yet and risk the criticism of his fellow Pharisees.

That comes later! Several chapters later in the Fourth Gospel we read how a group of Pharisees wanted Jesus arrested, and Nicodemus sticks up for Him:

“Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.” (John 7:51-52)

Still later on, Nicodemus will help out Joseph of Arimathea who took our Lord's body down from the cross. Nicodemus provided the uber-expensive myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body and fold into the grave clothes.

So I guess you can say, he "came a long way, baby!" in terms of belief, commitment, **faith** in the One he recognized early on as "a teacher who has come from God" (John 3:2), and whom he later came to know as God's promised Messiah, the One who would enable him to be "born from above," to become his authentic self.

Maybe you have a friend, relative or co-worker who has asked you if you're a "born again" Christian. That lingo comes from today's Gospel. Usually the question means, "Is there a moment in your life when you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" (It's called "point conversion.") That's foreign language to us baby baptizers: Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, etc. My response is, "I was reborn in Holy Baptism." And no, there's not a specific moment when the scales fell from my eyes and all of a sudden I realized I'm a sinner in need of a Savior. 'Seems like I've always known that.

But – I **also** know I can always become a **more** authentic self. God isn't finished with me yet. There are dead parts of all our lives that need to be resurrected. My 40 year old nephew recently died, suddenly, tragically, all alone. For whatever reasons he had turned to alcohol years ago to numb his pain. Maybe he kidded himself that alcohol made him his more acceptable self. We can only guess that alcoholism is the disease that turned out to be terminal in his case. And so every person I know and love who is in recovery from alcohol or from other drugs is a miracle to me. I think they would agree that in finding sobriety they have been born from above. I think they would agree that the ability to get into recovery didn't come from inside themselves, but from outside. It is God's grace.

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

Trusting their God, Abram & Sarai obediently went. They trekked from their home city, "Ur of the Chaldeas," to the Promised Land of milk and honey. In our second lesson from Romans 4, Paul says that Abraham's trust, Abraham's faith in God's wisdom and goodness, Abraham's obedience to God's command counts as righteousness. Our trust in God makes us right with God. Our trust in God paves the way for us to go wherever God leads. Sometimes we're testing the waters of truth under cover of darkness, like Nicodemus, and sometimes we're boldly saying the unpopular but true thing that earns us the scorn and criticism of our peers, like Nicodemus. Sometimes we're speeding forward, all energized by the possibilities God opens up before us, and sometimes we're moving ahead at a turtle's pace, all anxious about the changes God has in mind. And in all of this, the Holy Spirit is helping us uncover and embrace our authentic self. Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, put it this way: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

We who are baptized are only fully alive in Christ. I'll close with this eloquent reflection that I found and want to share with you:

So, says Christ, here is this ailing, sinful, foolish, desperate world that has lost its way, and is living like some primitive barbaric tribe which imagines that its nasty little customs are the only possible rules of life anywhere and for anyone. And if [people] see me, and keep looking at me, the heavenly things that are all dark to them will dawn upon them; and the glory of what God really is will come home to them; and the splendor of what a human life can be will storm their hearts, and sicken them of what they are, and bring them to their feet, whole [human beings], ready to live a fuller life than they have ever dreamed possible.¹

Amen.

¹*Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 7, NY: Abingdon, 1951), p. 509.

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