

II Lent
Gen 12:1-4 Rom 4:1-5, 13-17 Jn 3:1-17
St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco
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In the name of God who has created us, Christ who reconciles us, and the Spirit who sustains us, Amen.

This morning we hear a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus—a conversation that sounds much like a Master and disciple working on a Zen koan. Nicodemus, the not-quite disciple, has a hunch about Jesus but wants concrete assurance of who Jesus is. Jesus, the Master, wants him to think more deeply about what he has seen and heard. Jesus responds indirectly by saying, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Here Nicodemus confronts the limits of his literal thinking, and responds with questions of his own: “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” And so forth. Throughout this passage, the two halves of the conversation continue to pass one another in the night.

Misunderstanding one another is part of our human condition. Often we take what we hear at face value and don’t check out our data--those deeper meanings or the surrounding context that can change how we might respond. For example: A bishop from rural Tanzania, preaching about his first visit to the US, described his American host offering him a hot dog. Feeling disgust, the bishop had responded to his host that, in his culture, they do not eat dogs.¹ As I heard the bishop’s story, and the humor it evoked about how easily misunderstandings occur across cultures, it also was a poignant reminder of the importance of seeking out the deeper meanings of what we hear, even if it means asking a question before we respond.

Nicodemus represents those religious leaders who were trying honestly to make logical sense out of Jesus, and to not misunderstand. Jesus’ miracles offered clear signs; his teachings were rooted in scripture, although perhaps not the passages most popular or given the most weight among the Pharisees of his day. The passage that dumbfounds Nicodemus is reflected in Ezekiel: Yahweh says, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you...”²

Jesus respects Nicodemus’ earnestness, but grows frustrated at his over-attachment to the literal word. Poetry, metaphor, and the use of story to make a deeper point, all are abundant in the Hebrew scriptures. But, as a religious movement, the Pharisees focused heavily on literal interpretation and fulfilling the letter of the law, especially surrounding correct practices, purity, and other matters that defined what they believed was a life of faith.

¹ Personal field notes, November 5, 2011, Diocese of El Camino Real Convention. The story also is summarized in Phil Groves and Angharad Parry Jones *Living Reconciliation*, Forward Movement, 2013, p.54.

² Ezekiel 36:26.

In our society today, we might think of this as being “religious but not spiritual,” perhaps a counterpart to being “spiritual but not religious.” Both are problematic, but in different ways.

A core theme that runs throughout the readings this morning is the interplay between religiosity and spirituality. The invitation to the spiritual life, offered by God to Abram, is offered again, to all, through the embodiment and teachings of Jesus, as the way of life-giving relationship with God.

For Abram, God’s will is personally made known to him through the spiritual realm. One can only imagine the depth of spiritual conviction what would prompt him to leave his country, comfortable lifestyle, his kinship networks, friends, and all he knew to venture into the unknown, with only God’s promise guiding him.

Years ago, I was assigned as a seminarian to a Roman Catholic parish in the Boston area. One afternoon the pastor and I found a woman sitting in the church parking lot. She had set out on foot from a rural village in Guatemala, with only the clothes on her back, to search for her fourteen year old son who had fled rather than be forced to join a corrupt and violent militia or otherwise be killed. She had heard through acquaintances that he was in Boston. She had no documents, and no one to contact. She came to the church, trusting in God that she would find help. The pastor made a few discrete calls, found some who could take her in for a few days, and within two weeks the network of acquaintances had managed to reunite her with her son.

Even today, in the midst of calls for immigration bans and mass deportations, I think of this encounter and the human faces and stories that we can miss behind the statistics. Even where tough decisions need to be made, we must lose touch with the humanity of each and every one of those involved. It is in the spiritual connections where we encounter one another’s humanity, and where we feel part of something bigger than ourselves. This is where we can encounter the movement of God.

In the readings we not only hear God’s invitation to the spiritual life, but also God’s imperative to use our spiritual life to reflect on the actions and practices we undertake or support. In the passage from Romans, Paul points out that it isn’t our obedience to the letter of the law that brings about a just and right relationship with God. Rather, it comes through the kind of faith we have—faith that actively seeks a deeper meaning and understanding of God’s purpose. New Testament scholar Anders Nygren notes that for Paul, faith always involves the ongoing action of God.³ This means actively discerning God’s will, an openness to repenting when we go off-track, and a desire to change⁴ in ways that will reconcile us into just and right relationship with one another and with God. Out of this understanding of faith our religious practices should come.

³ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*. Philadelphia: Fortress [1949] 1983, p. 170.

⁴ Cf. Brian W. Harrison, “Justification by Faith,” <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/JUSFAITH.htm>.

All the great world religions have tensions between some internal groups that determine who is faithful or not by whether they observe literal and sometimes extreme religious practices, and other groups that express what we, as Christians, understand as spirituality--a quest for ultimate meaning, purpose, and direction beyond the literal word. Although religious practice helps people to live out their faith in the world, the spiritual dimension gives a deeper understanding of the meaning of those practices, including a critique of when they can run amok and become agents of injustice. A spiritual awakening allowed the Buddha to see the injustices of a rigid obedience to the Hindu caste system. Ghandi also drew upon spiritual aspects of his tradition in leading struggles for justice, as did Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Archbishop Desmond Tutu for the Civil Rights and anti-apartheid movements. Feminist Muslim scholars and practitioners have drawn on the Qur'an to challenge the rigid uses of Shariah law to justify honor killings and other ways that women have been inhumanely treated.

The spiritual life sometimes entails great risk; it did for Abram. Even Nicodemus, who was stirred by a desire for more to the religious life than observing the Law, went to Jesus at night, unseen, suggesting that tension among the religious leaders over Jesus would put his own standing in their community at-risk. For a former colleague, the manager of a plant in a company town that corporate headquarters had ordered to be closed, he took the risk to stay with the people in the community and, with a well-worn bible on his bookshelf and using his spiritual values to guide him, he kept his staff grounded and panic free, to the point where another business, attracted to the positive attitude of the workforce, would buy and reopen the plant, and keep the town from devastation. The manager knew he would lose his job, but this experience helped him too to land on his feet.

Sometimes the challenge we face is not enough risk. It's easy to become so comfortable in our practices that we lose touch with the need to encounter God freshly from time to time. The leader of a Benedictine retreat once described this as the "sickness that strikes in the noon day" --a feeling of emptiness or staleness that can arise in the midst of all we are doing--being active in church, saying our prayers, fulfilling the roles we've held perhaps for years. Healing this sickness, he urged, begins by changing our routine, finding the edge that makes us just uncomfortable enough to take a risk, trusting that God will open up our faith in fresh or deeper ways.⁵ For some, the edge may simply be a different liturgy or way of praying. For others, it may be a form of outreach that moves us into authentic conversation or action with others we might not otherwise encounter.

Lent is our special opportunity to search for deeper spiritual awakening, and the new growth and change it can bring. Our spiritual life is not an option, since our earthly life is but a transition in the eternal life of the spirit, presented to us--as Christians--through Christ.

Nicodemus would continue to seek out Jesus, perhaps longing for the deeper meaning and spiritual awakening he needed to gain. He didn't quite "get it," but he would return again...and again...in search of it. And so must we.

⁵ Canon Bailey, Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria. Tape recording of meditations, Benedictine retreat, Portland OR, August 1980.