

2 Lent
March 20, 2011

Genesis 12:1–4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1–5, 13–17
John 3:1–17
Year A

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Abram was either crazy, or gullible, or so lacking excitement in his life, that he didn't have anything better to do than pick up everything he had acquired, and participate in God's great relocation program.

By all accounts, he had a good life in Haran. In Genesis 12 it says "he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels." In Genesis 13 it says that "Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold." In other words, all the toys. In other words, given that he led a nomadic existence traveling from water to water, life was pretty cushy.

So it's curious, if not ridiculous, that God is pressing the restart button on humanity with old Abram, who should by rights be retiring at age seventy-five and sitting on the rocking chair with Sarai.

Up to this point in Genesis, God's experience with this blessing project was checkered. Last week we heard about Adam and Eve growing up by giving in to desire ("chomp, chomp, curses, we blew it"). Then Cain murders Abel (curses again). Then there was the flood idea with Noah and the animals. And finally, it was the ziggurat tower of Babel idea to climb to heaven. You think God might have given up, but today in chapter twelve of Genesis, Yahweh speaks these words to Abram: *lech-lecha*—"get up and go." Clearly, God needs Abram as much as Abram needs God. Sure there are promises, descendants for the old couple, but the onus is also on them to be a blessing.

Notice at this point Abram doesn't ask God who is talking to him, like Moses in the burning bush story. Notice at this point God doesn't offer any curriculum vitae like the kind we hear later, "who brought the Israelites out of the red sea," "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (oh right, we don't know anything like that yet!). All God says is *lech-lecha*. And the great relocation program is launched, the restart button is pushed, the root story for three great monotheistic religions is initiated as Abram goes, and leaves everything behind for whatever is next. Did I say he was seventy-five? (He had no idea what he was doing!)

Lent is a BIG time for do-overs. Lent is a BIG time to listen for God saying to us *lech-lecha*, "get up and go," "be recruited for my blessing project." I don't think you have to be as old as seventy-five to hear the voice. I don't think there is any age requirement at all.

If Abram was minding his business when Yahweh called him, then Nicodemus stirred the pot for a new life.

In Genesis, God found Abram in Haran and then redirected him to Canaan, the Promised Land.

In today's gospel, the gospel of John, tip-toeing in the dark and seeking enlightenment, Nicodemus found Jesus. Nicodemus was an admirer of Jesus, from a distance....curious...a seeker. And Jesus plays him like a violin. Jesus ramps it up quickly after being complimented as a sign-maker.

Now whenever Jesus says "very truly" in John, we must cup our hands, furrow our brows, and listen. And what does he say after the first "very truly?" *No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above (again).* Did he say **above**? Or did he say **again**? The Greek has a double meaning. Nicodemus gets stuck on biology, imagining climbing back into his mother's womb.

Jesus ramps it up with another "very truly," talking about that kingdom stuff that seems so important in the gospels, this second time mentioning water and the Spirit (wind). Did he say **Spirit** or **wind**? Again, a double meaning in Greek, pneuma can mean Spirit or wind.

And then one more "very truly" that this time sounds like gears shifting, from Jesus speaking to Nicodemus to a kind of church testimony. This time the *lech-lecha* is about Jesus getting up, I mean lifted up, a kind of last sign in John that offer life from the throne of the cross as a kind of ultimate blessing project for the cosmos.

Lent is a BIG time for seeking Jesus. Lent is a BIG time for knowing how thirsty we are, how important water is, how baptism re-orient us to life with God.

Nicodemus has no idea what he was getting into when he comes to Jesus in the dark of night. Jesus lights up like a firecracker when he speaks, blasting words that are written in all caps and boldface that speak of the passionate love of God to reclaim the world for life, **LIFE** all caps and boldface.

Even as Nicodemus disappears into the background while Jesus lights up, we know don't we that Abram back in Genesis jumped into that LIFE? Don't we know that we are to jump in, too?

Don't get me wrong, the journey to the Promised Land is not secured as Abram gets up and goes. He will encounter many obstacles. He will act as if he doesn't believe the promise was ever given.

Don't get me wrong, the baptismal life is not one glorious splash into eternity. It is as Luther described a daily drowning and dying of the old person with all sins and evil desires and a new person rising up to **LIVE** (all caps and boldface).

The people I know, the churches I know, the me I know, we are weakest when we live by fear. Inaction, inertia, coasting along, or back-sliding represent the world we live in because we don't know what could happen, and our imaginations are fueled by our anxiety about the worst.

The people I know, the churches I know, the me I know, we are strongest when we risk **LIFE** (all caps and boldface). Taking action, getting off the dime, taking a new direction also represent the world we live in all the while we don't know what will happen, but that our imaginations are fueled by the Spirit's wisdom and the invitation we hear as we listen, really listen.

Lech-lecha. Get up and go! Be reborn. Be born from above. Be blown by the wind and the Spirit. Live as the walking wet, that others may be drawn into life, meaningful life, abundant life, the life that lasts.

Christ on the cross is the sign. The community of Christ is the sign. Drawn into Christ's call to be reborn, and to live, we are the sign.

I invite you now to listen (cup hands) to this advice from a community that is centered on prayer and work, and see if you might take the plunge into life again this Lent.

*What is wanted is not that we should find
ultimate truth,
nor that we should become secure,
nor that we should have ease,
nor that we should be without hurt,
but that we should live fully.*

*Therefore we should not fear life,
nor anything in life,
We should not fear death,
nor anything in death,
We should live our lives
in love with life.*

*It is for us
to train our hearts
to live in grace,
to sacrifice our self-centered desires,
to find the peace without want
without seeking it for ourselves,
and when we fail,
to begin again each day.*

If we adopt an outlook of confidence and trust and perfect our experience by care for others, if we live in the certainty that we are heirs in the providence of the outermost mystery, we will begin to change into the persons that we have the potential to be.

--from *Always We Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living*, by John McQuiston II (Ridgefield CT: Morehouse Publishing, © 1996), pp 21-22.

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