

March 5, 2023

Abram and Nicodemus, Lent 2

Bonni-Belle Pickard

Pre-service music:

One more step along the world I go – StF 476

Teach me to dance – StF 477

I danced in the morning – StF 247

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship – (Genesis 12:1-2)

StF 464 God it was who said to Abram

Prayer

Genesis 12:1-4a

Conversations – when God called you to something new

God who sets us on a journey (Revd Mervyn Dine, Singing The Faith Plus website)

John 3:1-17

Meditation – Mrs Nicodemus' Monologue

StF 779 Stay with me

Intercessions and Lord's Prayer

StF 394 Spirit of God, unseen as the wind

Benediction

Prayer

God of our beginnings and our endings,
Our history and our future,
Our everyday steps and our occasional leaps,
We come again to listen to your voice
Calling us to observe what you're doing around us
Where there is need
Where you've given us gifts
Where those gifts can be used to satisfy needs.
We come to listen acutely, to come together to listen,
Because it's often easy to ignore your voice
In the day-to-day sameness –
Or the day-to-day busy-ness.
And yet you continue to call ordinary people to extraordinary ministry:
You continue to equip
You continue to bless.
Be with us today and all along our journey, Lord Jesus.
Open our eyes to your blessings. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4a

Now the LORD said to Abram,
'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house
to the land that I will show you.
I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse;
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'
So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.
Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Can you remember a time when God called you to do something new –
To go somewhere you'd never been before
To try something that scared you?
To take on a new position or a new responsibility?
I imagine it must have been quite a surprise for Abram to hear God's call –
Especially at age 75!
To leave the place he'd known all his life
and move on to something else...
Abram was a wealthy landowner by that time –
He'd worked hard all his life, and had many servants and workers –
He had a wife as well but no children –
A nephew and many herds of cattle and goats
But no offspring.
If he were to leave the place he'd known all his life
He would also be leaving the sphere of the local god –
But what if there were something more waiting him elsewhere?
How would he survive without the blessing of the local god?

I was intrigued to realise as I looked at this passage in the Bible
That Abram wasn't the first of his family to leave...
His father, Terah, had left his own homeland of Ur of the Chaldeans
And had travelled to the land of Canaan, settling in Haran.
I also was reminded that Abram's own father was 75 years old
When Abram was born.
Terah apparently lived on for 250 years –
Which means he would still have been alive
When Abram moved again from Haran further into the land of Canaan.
It's while he's travelling there that famine broke out
And he ended up travelling with his family to Egypt.

Apparently it was in the willingness to travel that he accumulated his riches!
In the following chapter of Genesis, we're told that by the time he left Egypt,
Abram was 'very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold' (Gen 13.2) –
Perhaps this was how he began to learn that God would continue to bless him
Even when he ventured out to new places, new situations, new opportunities.

I discussed this recently with the circuit ministers who each have had some experience
In following God's call to a new place, new responsibilities, new challenges.
Though frequent physical moves are part and parcel of ordained Methodist ministry,
We're well aware that God's call to do new things
Also applies to those who aren't ministers –
That, though some of us might remain in the same location or position
for years or decades – or a lifetime,
Still God has a variety of different tasks for us to do at different times.

One minister spoke of God's calling as a 'process' –
That many different calls can come to us over our lifetimes –
For myself, those calls have included an understanding of where I was to go to university,
Who my marriage partner would be,
What my vocation would be (and that has changed during my lifetime),

At one point, God's call was for me and my husband to go to India to teach,
At another time to adopt a child,
Still another to foster other children,
The call to become a minister was one call in the midst of many –
The call to be a minister in England was still a different part of the calling process.
If you're waiting for a 'big' call, you might have ignored all the smaller ones along the way!

Another minister reminded us that Abram was leaving a situation of 'prosperity'
But God's calling was pointing him towards an even greater 'promise'.
Are we willing to offer our personal successes to God
Knowing that God might have something even better in store?

Another minister spoke of seemingly insurmountable barriers giving way
Once the decision was made to follow a most unusual call.
Are we willing to consider that God is larger than the barriers?

Still another minister spoke of finding that once he'd said 'yes',
And been trained in a particular ministry,
God had sent him to another ministry setting that didn't seem to require
What he'd been trained for!
Are we willing to accept that God has an infinite array of ways that we can serve?

Those of you who have attended our circuit 'farewell' and 'welcome' services
over the past few years
Will know that the next hymn is one of my favourite for these 'coming and going' events –
But it also applies to so many smaller decisions that we make
While following God's lead.

[God who sets us on a journey]

In our second scripture reading today, we come upon a figure in John's gospel
Known as Nicodemus.
Nicodemus appears a few times in John's Gospel,
And some have argued that he becomes one of Jesus' most sincere followers...
But he doesn't do so without some sincere questioning of Jesus,
What Jesus is all about, what Jesus is requiring of him.
Some have disregarded Nicodemus, implying that he shouldn't ask such questions –
But I've come to know that God honours our hard questions –
Indeed, it's most often in the hard questioning
That we gain our deepest understanding.
I like to ask hard questions, too – and that drives some people close to me crazy!
After we hear this reading of the scripture from John's Gospel,
I'll be presenting another dramatic monologue –
This one from the perspective of 'Mrs Nicodemus' –
A wife who might have spent many years with a spouse full of questions!

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.
²He came to Jesus by night and said to him,
'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God;
for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'
³Jesus answered him,
'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'
⁴Nicodemus said to him,
'How can anyone be born after having grown old?
Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'
⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you,
no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.
⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above."
⁸The 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 Spirit.'
⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'
¹⁰Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel,
and yet you do not understand these things?
¹¹ 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen;
yet you do not receive our testimony.
¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?
¹³No one has ascended into heaven
except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.
¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.
¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Mrs Nicodemus' Monologue

He was out again tonight – I always get a bit nervous when he's out after dark

I'd like him to carry a torch with him,

But he thinks that would attract too much attention

Not that my Nick is particularly a private man –

He's respectable – he is a Pharisee, of course! –

He doesn't go out shouting and waving his arms around

Nor is he the kind that prays loudly in the street to attract attention

But he can speak his mind when he needs to...

My Nick is a thoughtful one

Sometimes I tell him he's too thoughtful

Sometimes he just will NOT let go of something that he's mulling over

Sometimes he just drives me crazy with his thinking through...

I tell him: Give it a rest, Nick. You don't have to understand everything in the world!

The sun will still rise tomorrow if you haven't figured everything out tonight

But it's hard for him to 'give it a rest'.

He will mull it over, look at it this way, that way

Upside down, inside out

Until he understands...

That's how it was when he first heard about Jesus.

He'd come home brimming over with stories

About the things he'd heard –

And the things he'd seen

He wanted to tell me about that wedding at Cana where Jesus turned the water to wine

And then that incident in the temple when Jesus turned the tables into matchsticks

And sent the sheep and goats on a stampede....

How Jesus had said if the whole thing was destroyed,

He'd build it back up again – by himself!

About how things had to change

At the temple

With our systems, our traditions –

Sounded positively dangerous to me – what with the Romans all about –

But to Nick it was intriguing

He'd come back in the evening with stories to tell

And questions rolling out thick and fast

His eyes eager with interest

Hardly able to settle at night...

His body tossing and turning on his mat

As his mind tossed and turned in his head...

So I wasn't too surprised when he went out that night some time back...

Some have whispered about it to me –

That they'd seen my husband going out after dark

And wondering where he'd been...

Not exactly respectable behaviour for a Pharisee!

When I asked him straight out where he'd been

he suddenly looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time

It would be easy to say his eyes were wide open in panic,
But I've known him long enough to recognise the intrigue
He'd seen something that had grabbed his attention –
And it wasn't letting go.

He told me he'd been to see Jesus.
He told me about their strange conversation
About how Jesus was talking about being born again/born from above –
Born in a new way...

I wondered what two men knew about childbirth!
They might have observed the months of a woman waiting and growing
Of a belly getting bigger and harder till it was ready to burst
They might have heard the moans or even screams from the birthing room
They would have seen the newborn – and the exhausted mother...
But what did they know of being born or giving birth?

Nick said Jesus spoke of being born of 'water and spirit'
Plenty of water with a birth!
Water whooshing out and exploding everywhere – uncontrollable!
Plenty of spirit as well...
Spirit – breath -- giving life to flesh --
The heaving gasps of the mother giving her all to the forces
Of pushing the baby from one world into the next
That first gulping breath that the child takes in
Suddenly finding itself in completely new territory
Air to breathe, cool breeze on its skin
After months in the warm and cozy womb
Limbs to stretch in ways that increasingly weren't possible
While still cramped inside
Ears hearing sounds that were familiar inside
But now come from somewhere outside...
Eyes experiencing light for the first time –
Dare one peek out at the brightness?
A throat finding a voice that had never been used or heard before
Calling out – I'm here! But where am I?
Everything has changed –
Water and Spirit, Flesh and Blood, Being Born, Giving Birth...
Everything is new...

I watched Nicodemus carefully that night when he came back from seeing Jesus –
I listened to his words and his face as he described what he'd heard –
His eyes had that wild wonder – almost as if he'd given birth himself!
Jesus talking about the coming Kingdom of God as if it were like childbirth –
As if coming into God's presence was like being born –
Everything is changed, everything is new.

I listened hard to Nicodemus, but I didn't need to say much.
He didn't really notice my silence, because he had so much to think about himself.
He started to explain about how he'd asked Jesus how one could re-enter his mother's womb

But he looked at me sideways as he told me,
And I could see he knew that Jesus meant something different.
I knew he wasn't taking Jesus' words literally –
And that he knew Jesus wasn't speaking literally either –
Jesus was trying to describe something indescribable –
and the best language he could use was about the journey
from womb to waking world...

That gave me plenty to think about that night.
Nicodemus had plenty to think about as well –
Both of us feeling as though we were standing on the edge of a vast adventure
An adventure calling us, daring us
To take the first step.
As we lay there deep into the night, Nicodemus reached over to give my hand a squeeze –
He whispered that Jesus had also said that making the journey
Involved trusting in him –
“Believing” was the word he used...
Believing that we too could be part of the world Jesus knew
That being part of that world
Wasn't just about following all the rules –
We'd done that all our lives!
It was about trusting – believing – in a love that went beyond the rules...
He was silent for a while,
And I thought he'd finally gone to sleep
But then he whispered that *the rules had been there to teach us about love...*
I reached over and gave him a soft kiss...
And we both were soon asleep...

That night was some time ago now.

In the days that followed, we both had been listening and watching hard
To see and hear what Jesus would be doing next.
There were more stories on the grapevine about Jesus' encounters with other folk –
Jews and Gentiles, crowds and individuals –
People you'd think a Jewish teacher would never be involved with –
A Samaritan woman!
5000 folk gathering at the seaside
Many of the stories seemed to have something to do with water –
Not just the water and the wine.
But the 'living water' with the woman at the well
Or Jesus walking on the water
Or Jesus talking about 'rivers of living water' flowing at the Festival
I kept thinking about the waters of childbirth...

After Jesus healed a blind man,
he talked with the Pharisees about seeing for the first time
Which made me think about a newborn baby first opening its eyes...
The stories circulated about the blind man seeing and 'believing'
And that reminded me of that middle-of-the night conversation with My Nick
And what Jesus meant by 'believing'

Not everyone seemed to grasp what Jesus was talking about, though –
Especially some of the other Pharisees
Who seemed especially threatened by Jesus' words...
I often wondered what they were afraid of!
Does a baby fear its birth? Does a baby have to 'believe' to be born?

It was an evening not long after -- that my Nick again came home
With his brow knitted up in thought...
The temple police were in debate with the other Pharisees –
Apparently some of the police – and the crowds! -- saw something in Jesus
Something special that made them wonder
why so many of the Pharisees were hell-bent on dismissing Jesus.
Nicodemus was troubled. After a long, tense hour of quiet turmoil
He blurted out that he had spoken publicly to his fellow religious leaders –
He had reminded them that the Law requires that an accused be given a trial –
Even as he told me what he'd said,
He admitted that he'd probably stretched the words from the Law a bit –
But even if it didn't say exactly that –
That was what it meant –
It was important to listen carefully to what people said –
To hear what they really meant –
And just because what one heard might not agree with what one thought one *knew*
That didn't mean it wasn't true...

Again, it was a restless night for my Nick.
And for me.
And the days and nights that followed weren't much better.
The storm clouds grew in the public debates
Even while Jesus showed more and more signs
And tried to explain through more and more words...
How the world God wanted for us all was constructed not of condemning laws
But of loving justice.
They were difficult words to understand
And difficult signs to make sense of when one was accustomed to everyday life.

I kept pondering those words about birth and water and spirit and new life...
Especially as I heard about Jesus washing his disciples' feet
At the feast before the Passover.
Who washes one's servants' feet?!?
There was the 'water' again –
But the way it was being used was all topsy-turvy – against all the rules and customs
Unless the Law was about loving...
But in a strange and calming way, it began to make perfect sense
Even if I couldn't really describe it rationally to anyone else.
Nick couldn't either. But we both kept trying.

==

You will have heard by now what happened after that...
How the authorities finally decided to take matters into their own hands
About how they had the mock trial
And how they flogged him

And how... how they crucified him...
About how, even when he was hanging there on the cross,
They stabbed a spear through his side –
Right where his womb would have been if he were a woman –
And the water and the blood – and the spirit – poured out.

Just like he was giving birth.

Except he had died.

My Nick came back very late that night.

He'd rushed back in several times during the late afternoon and evening –
Our eyes had met once or twice,
His eyes were focussed and determined
His mouth firm and set.
It was the Sabbath, and he should have been resting –
I lit the candles, I said the prayers on my own...
He was assembling a huge stash of myrrh and aloes –
Weighing nearly as much as himself!
He only spoke briefly to say that he and his friend Joseph
were preparing a burial fit for a King.
The Sabbath Law was being exchanged for a labour of love.

When he returned late, late in the night,

He went silently to the sleeping mat...
And after a while, I could hear his silent sobs
As I reached over, I could feel the tears on his cheek
Sobs of Spirit
Waters of cleansing?
Promises of new birth seemingly dissolving into... what?

==

It is the morning of the Sabbath now.

The sun is hiding behind the clouds.
Everywhere is silence and darkness.
I have been trying to tell you this story
Though in reality, there are no words to tell it properly.
The world seems to be holding its breath –
As if the Spirit is waiting, waiting...
No one would believe me if I said it out loud –
But it feels very much
Like waiting for New Birth....

We wait...

In the waiting, in the watching, come, Lord Jesus,
And help us understand who you are – and what you are calling us to...
God of new beginnings, of births, of deaths, of resurrections,
Of new understandings that lead us to new callings:
We consider how you choose ordinary things in ordinary lives –
Things like water that we need for washing and cleaning,
For drinking, for survival – for tears of joy and sorrow --
And through them you speak to us of the essentials for how we are to survive:
Love and challenge, commitment and making new...
Lord, help us when we don't understand.
Keep coming to us in the things we take for granted.
Keep speaking to us until we hear.

Lord, sometimes the uncertainties all around us make us unable to hear --
Sometimes we only know that you have called us
But we're not sure *what* you have called us to -- or *where* or *why*...
We want to say 'yes', Lord. We want to follow –
But sometimes the way ahead seems very unclear.

Surround us, Good God, with your Spirit to guide us.
Send us fellow travellers to journey with us.
Send us those with questions to make us think.
Send us those with patience to help us wait.
Send us wise ones who had travelled before and can show the way.
Send us enthusiastic ones who don't know the way,
But will dance with us along the path.
Send us practical ones who will help us carry the load...
But remind us, Lord, that you might need *us* to show another the way,
Or to lead them in the dance or help them carry their load.
Remind us, too, Good Lord, that the best journeys are not the easiest.
That we can travel further when we travel with others – and with you.
That you will not call us to any journey
That you will not travel with us.

Lord, we think of others who are struggling today in their journeys –
Some struggling with health issues or physical challenges –
Some struggling with relationship problems
Some struggling with mental or emotional trials.
Some are stuck in places where they are not flourishing,
But that are afraid to move on.
Some are running away when you need them to stay.
Some are simply tired of the journey.
We lift up the situations of which we are aware –
We ask for your guidance, Lord, for you will know what we need to do.
We know there are also situations of which we know nothing –
But you do, Lord....
If there are ways you can use us, Lord,
We open ourselves to those possibilities.
In all this, we trust you, Lord – as Abram trusted you in Haran and Canaan and Egypt,
As Nicodemus trusted you in ancient Galilee... [Lord's Prayer]