

Second Sunday of Lent  
February 17, 2008  
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After I got my driver's license I would ask my Dad for directions to places that I wanted to go. He would give me careful directions and then add, "Why don't you look at a map?"

Well, to be honest, I did not need to look at a map because I could rely on my Dad to give me good directions. I always arrived at the destination I was seeking and I always returned home safely. My Dad enjoyed maps. Sometimes he would look at a map just to see where some place was located with no intention of going there. Maps are a nice tool but who needs a map if your father can tell you how to arrive at your desired destination?

I thought about maps as I read the lessons for today. In the lessons we meet two travelers who are seeking different types of destinations and the wisdom of a commentator named Paul who offers us some guidance to aid our understanding about these travelers.

The first traveler we meet is Abram, better known to us as Abraham the father of nations. This Biblical character is the symbolic father of Jews, Christians and Muslims. Abraham is challenged by God to leave his home, travel to an unknown land and there begin a new nation. Abraham not only listens to God's call but he believes God and does what God asks of him.

Now, moving away from home is no easy task. Abraham is seventy five years old at this point in his story. That is an age when most people hope to be settled down in some place nice and warm as they live out their days. Abraham had already made one major move in his life. He moved from Ur, a city in the Fertile Crescent to Haran.

Granted Abraham did not have to worry about selling his home in a depressed real estate market. But he did have to dismantle his tents, lots of tents. He had to pack up his family, his servants and their families, his cattle, sheep, donkeys, chickens and the like. While Abraham was head of his household and could pretty much say to his tribe, "This is what we are going to do." I suspect he needed to convince others this was a good idea.

Imagine the conversation with his wife Sarai. Abraham comes home and says,

"Dear, I have been talking to God and we are going to pack up and move. I am not sure where we are going but we need to leave as soon as we can. By the way, Sarai, God said we would be the parents of nations." Sarai must have been surprised since it is reported that she did not have a child until she was older and beyond child bearing age. Yet, Sarai went along with what Abraham told her. Abraham and Sarai listened to God and believed.

Abraham, the pilgrim, starts out for an unknown destination with no map in hand and no directions to guide him. He traveled by faith. All he had was a promise from God that he would be blessed, because we know the rest of Abraham's story, we know he was blessed and God's promise was fulfilled.

The second traveler we meet this morning is Nicodemus. Nicodemus sought out Jesus by night when the crowds were not hovering around. It was a safe time to ask Jesus a question and to ponder the mysteries of God's kingdom with one who seemed to know. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a strict adherent to the Jewish Law. He was a leader among the Jews, a powerful man and a teacher himself.

Nicodemus sought direction to an elusive destination that Jesus called the kingdom of God. Jesus preached about this kingdom and Nicodemus wanted to know more. The encounter between these two teachers tells us something about how each of these men approached life. Nicodemus was looking for a logical answer. He was a lawyer seeking solid evidence. He begins not by asking a question of Jesus rather by telling Jesus who he is. "I have seen your miracles, your signs and wonders and I know you are from God."

Jesus responds to him from a very different place. "You do not really have a clue who I am. You saw me change water to wine at a wedding feast. You heard that I drove those making a business of worship out of the Temple. So, you draw some conclusions and think you know who I am. Nicodemus, your slipping over here in the night tells me that your identifying who I am is not a statement of faith."

Jesus then spells out another way to approach the kingdom of God. He makes it clear that one cannot find the way entirely by human effort. Arrival in the kingdom is a gift - a gift from God, a gift of the Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus that to be born of the wind would mean allowing the Spirit to propel him along the way without any sense of his old securities or logical conclusions. To be born of the wind would mean trusting God's love for him and for all people. "It is like the blowing wind," said Jesus, "you cannot tell where it is coming from and you do not know where it is going to blow you. It is just there and you can feel its effects."

The difference between trying to find one's way to the kingdom and being led there is considerable. In fact, it is so radically different that it is like being born anew.

The third person we meet this morning was a great traveler himself. Paul was one of the earliest missionaries and might well be called the first systematic theologian of the church. Paul goes to great length to show how responsive Abraham was to God's leading in a way that Nicodemus could not understand. It was not Abraham's adherence to the law or his following of any logical plan that led him to the Promised Land, it was his faith in God. Paul plays this tune over and over in his letters. I suspect he does so because it was his own personal experience. Our justification, our entering the kingdom, is a gift. It is God's unmerited, unconditional, undeserved gift to us extended by grace alone. Our response is to receive the gift in faith.

The other persons of importance this morning are those of us gathered here in this You are I are confronted every day with challenges. Some challenges are routine matters. They are so familiar that we hardly notice them. They are the normal choices we make every day, day in and day out. They may not be turning points in our lives but they are challenges to those of us who seek to travel the Christian way.

God helps us face these challenges in a variety of ways and through various means. It may be the quiet prodding of our conscience, it may be in the reading of Scripture or in prayerful struggle with a problem. It may be in the demands made on us by family and friends. As Abraham must have been at the beginning, we are at times afraid to respond because we don't have a road map. There seems to be no one who can say, "This is the right way." "This is the decision you should make." "This is how you should act." "This is what your faith requires."

What we are called to do when faced with new challenges is to take one step at a time just as Abraham did. It is to say, "Okay, Lord, I do not know where I am headed but I am going to trust you to guide me." That is a step in faith.

The promise of the Gospel is that God will help us take the second step, the third step, the tenth step, the twentieth step, the one hundredth step until the challenge is met. Reliance on God's graceful guidance is, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, like being born anew. When we put our lives into God's hands we give up control. We become child like able to trust relying on love and caring guidance. In this new birth we gain access to spiritual liberation and power. The glorious thing about

this Christian understanding of how the Spirit works in our lives is that it can happen over and over when we rely on God to be with us through each new challenge.

Being born anew affirms the words of the Psalmist, "Our help comes from God, the maker of heaven and earth."

Amen