

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
March 19, 2017; Live in the Blessing; Lent 2A  
Gen. 12:1-4, John 3:1-17

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The Lord said to Abraham, “Go. And 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.” And he did: he packed up all he had, gathered his family, and he off went. Abraham trusted God’s word and left all he knew, he kept moving – and discovered a deepening faith on the journey. It certainly wasn’t always easy – it never is but the promises of God always call us forward, into new and unexplored territory, bringing new possibilities where none existed before. That’s exciting, isn’t it. But it’s also risky.

This speech of God to Abraham is at the same time, imperative and promise, summons and assurance. It’s God’s work and yet there is a command that must be followed: the command to go.

Abraham could not have discovered the trustworthiness of God if he had not gone from Ur to Haran and then to Canaan. You and I cannot follow God without moving and we cannot move without leaving some things behind. Abraham left his country, his kin, and his father’s house. To move with God means to make choices to leave certain things, certain options behind.

Some of Jesus' disciples were asked to leave their families, or their work, or their wealth, or sin, or even their grief over the dead. Jesus' entire ministry was on the move and he expected his disciples to be ready to go with him. Some people start this journey thinking faith can be an "add-on", something to enhance life, perhaps, an extra resource to help along the way. But it doesn't work like that, does it - to follow God involves turning away from certain things, leaving behind some old attitudes, values, behaviors, even changing some of those ideas we've come to believe about God. The first movement of faith involves the command: "go from"... and it's not just about the physical movement of course, but about changing our minds, our perceptions, and our actions. And that's the tough one, isn't it. But we have lots of help along the way.

Now we meet Nicodemus - quite a contrast from last week when we met the Samaritan Woman in the heat of the day at the well: remember, it's the longest conversation Jesus had with anyone in the gospels - a conversation with an unnamed woman, who actually talked theology with him; the first person he told that I am he - the one you wait for. And she went back to the town to bring others back to meet the Messiah - her response: he can't be, can he?

Today we meet Nicodemus – a man with a name! And we talk theology too but in the cool dark of the night, full of shadows and questions, resistance and doubt. We eavesdrop as Jesus talks with him, the “big shot” religious leader, a learned, respected figure in the community. Nicodemus sees himself having a conversation between two established authorities. He calls Jesus “rabbi...teacher”. He speaks with the air of one who has power and tradition on his side. It’s a “let’s talk - teacher to teacher.” He’s speaking for and from the establishment - he’s confident. He brings to the conversation a fixed understanding of what can and cannot happen in the world and in human experience. Just like we do.

Though Nicodemus could go anywhere he wanted any time he wanted (as long as he didn’t anger the Romans), he felt he had to sneak in to visit Jesus in the dark of the night. We don’t know why – maybe he wondered who this Jesus was who had attracted such crowds – what’s different about him and what he is teaching? Or maybe he sensed that this Jesus was trouble, so it was better not to be seen talking to him. Nicodemus, the scholar and thoughtful one, goes to see Jesus secretly to talk with him, to listen to him, to ask him questions, in the darkness – which in John’s gospel is more than just a time of day. The darkness of night is symbolic of

a lost age, a world of evil and gloom, to which the light of Christ has come.

The rest of the story, and of the whole gospel of John, is about that tightly bound world coming unraveled. At each turn in the road, Jesus confronts Nicodemus' boxed in view of reality. People indeed can be born anew when they are old, life is full of mystery, and the Spirit is beyond all human control, blowing where it will. But Nicodemus had to give up his vision of Jesus as rabbi to discover Jesus was also the Son of God. Like us, Nicodemus had to give up the "we know" to break free of the familiar, the box both he and we live in, to truly open ourselves to the moving of the Spirit.

Back to Abraham: God said to him, go to the land that I will show you. That was, of course, a journey into the unknown. Abraham went, by faith, not knowing where he was going. Now, we all crave in our lives: prosperity, recognition, security, well-being, familiarity – and I have to believe Abraham did too. The future for Abraham was a matter of what God would do, what God would accomplish - Abraham didn't, couldn't see, where the journey would end - the destination of that journey was God's, not his. But he went. He went anyway.

The call to go is risky because we don't know where the Lord is leading us. And it's risky because we have to learn to live with

an amount of uncertainty – and we don't like that much do we. We're so sure sometimes, just like Nicodemus. And Jesus will do his best to shake that, to open up the box - how do we respond? How indeed.

We don't hear again of Nicodemus for a long time in the gospel of John – until he met Joseph of Arimathea and together they bound Jesus' body in linen cloths and spices and laid him in the tomb. Something changed for Nicodemus after that encounter with Jesus. He was reborn. He made a choice, didn't he. Abraham made a choice, didn't he. And so do we.

Seems to me we're all a lot like Nicodemus here. We're not likely to be called away from home and family and all that's familiar to establish a new nation as was Abraham. Although, many of us have been called away from all that's familiar and we've done it. With some misgivings, some fear and trepidation, I'm sure - and I can't believe on some level, Abraham and Nicodemus didn't feel those same things. It's tough to go into uncharted territory, to seek new life among strangers. Ask any child what it's like to go into a new school. Ask anyone what it's like to start a new job. Ask anyone what it's like to move to a totally new community. Ask anyone what it's like to begin a totally new relationship. We know about that, don't we. What's the same for all of these situations, is we have to let the old go in

order to fully enter in, participate in the new life. It's not a straight line either, is it. We don't wake up one morning secure and confident in the changes we've made. It just doesn't work that way. I know that and you do too.

No, we're a lot like Nicodemus. We face an opportunity for change and we try our best to make it less different, less threatening, less foreign to our experience. We try to build on what we know in order to make sense of what's new. But faith isn't an add on. Sometimes we just have to take a deep breath, and let go. The wind of God's spirit blows where it chooses and it is beyond our knowing. And it's beyond the boundaries that we know. The categories of what is possible and what is impossible intrude on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. And Nicodemus gets stuck - everyone knows a fully grown man can't be reborn. What is this born again idea? But Jesus isn't talking about a physical rebirth, is he. We all know that. The original Greek word used here is "*anōthen*" - we don't have one word to define this - it means anew and again and from above - all of those things. Jesus tells Nicodemus, us, that we must be born anew and again and from above, born of the spirit, that life giving spirit which breaks open possibilities, which breaks us out of our comfortable box, which leads us into the mystery which is beyond all human knowledge and control. That mystery leads us to let the

spirit move, to lead us to new directions, to open possibilities that we can't imagine. We can break the boundaries of what's possible and what's impossible. And isn't that liberating!

Let's lean into the mystery. We've seen tremendous changes here at St. Paul's over the past number of years – just like many churches indeed. We yearn for the days when our Church School building was noisy and full of children – the art that still decorates the halls on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor reminds us of those times. We yearn for the days when our pews were full – when our finances were stable – when we had multiple people serving on our various commissions – when we had many people walking the CROP walk – when there was an active youth group – when the back hallway didn't show the water damage from a hurricane, when dry rot hadn't taken over the narthex ceiling. We're not alone in being tired, discouraged, worn down, worn out, concerned, maybe even afraid of what's ahead of us.

However. There is something going on here that we might be missing. And after years of year end deficits, we ended 2016 even, thanks to a check received the last week of the year. Not many churches have nearly half of their members in worship on a given week. This church made a difference to families at Christmas. We have a sit-down coffee hour each week. People volunteer to serve as liturgists, host coffee hour and bring food donations to our

basket in the back of the sanctuary. You received the first edition of the Tower since last summer last week. We do a weekly e-news. Our facebook page is active – people are looking at it! And Angela has started the process of updating our website.

Here's something else that's struck me – last week we had four generations of St. Paul's people here to celebrate the baptism of our youngest sister in Christ. 4 generations! And during the past two weeks I've heard from two additional families about baptizing their young children – both families who grew up in this church and want to come “home” for this special sacrament. I've done one funeral and will do another in April for families who have been connected to this church in the past – they wanted the connection as they grieve their loss.

Something's happening here.

Friends, we're not done yet. God has plans for us! God is saying to us : go and I will make of you a new people. Dream – don't be stuck in the old order – we all know the world is different these days! And I still firmly believe it's a wonderful and so very important time to be church. The world around us needs to know integrity matters. The world around us needs to know every person matters. Friends, the War on Poverty is over – not because there are no more poor people. It's an important time to be church – a critical time to be church. How will we respond to Jesus' call to be

caring of “the least of these.” All those who are the old, the young, hungry, sick, oppressed, lost, lacking education, homeless, refugees – they need us to teach and follow Jesus’ command: love each other as I have loved you. Take the risks. Answer God’s call!

What are your dreams? Why is this church family important to you? What keeps you coming back, being involved? How do you, how can you, help to make our light of love shine for this community to see? How can we offer a radical hospitality, a welcome, a sense of peace and a passion for justice, and encourage others to join us on our journey?

Let’s move into God’s future but let’s not expect to have any more clarity about where we are going than Abraham did. In the same way that Israel is not left to live in a vacuum, we’re not either. God’s promise to them, to us, is that we will be connected, we will be a blessing to others. The promise is that when we trust and obey, God will bring possibilities where none existed before.

Our journey is one of possibilities emerging from disappointment, joy from sorrow, hope from despair, birth from barrenness, life from death. It is a movement toward finding a home, a place, an identity in God’s kingdom, God’s plan and purpose. In our journey, where we’re always on the move, in a world where God cannot be boxed in or nailed down, and things

always seem in flux, we're heading toward a home where Christ is the crucified and risen Christ whose promises and presence are sure.

Sometimes we just have to take a deep breath, and let go. The wind of God's spirit blows where it chooses and it is beyond our knowing. And as we remember John's gospel statement: "For God so loved the world that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life," we will find ourselves a new people who can do anything with God's help. God loves this world, loves this church, loves each of us: now and always. Let's live into that blessing together! Let's go! Amen.

Our hymn: #54 in the red hymnal – I Sing the Praise of the Lord Unbounded. #54