

“Change We Can Believe In”
Genesis 12:1-4
John 3:1-17

Let us begin with a prayer attributed to St. Augustine.

Oh, God, from whom to be turned is to fall; to whom to be turned is to rise; and in whom to stand is to abide forever, grant us in all our duties your help; in all our perplexities, your guidance; in all our dangers, your protection; and in all our sorrows, your peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, our body, and our blood, our life and our nourishment. Amen.

Change We Can Believe In. Don't let the sermon title spook you. This is not a political statement, I only wanted to get your attention!

Change – we have a love-hate relationship with it. As someone once said, “Our dilemma is that we hate change and love it at the same time; what we really want is for things to remain the same but get better.”ⁱ Since that's not likely to happen, what is the change we can believe in?

By *change*, I mean what happens when we open up our lives to the Spirit of God. In this morning's scripture readings, we meet Abraham and Nicodemus. Though they lived centuries apart and the context of their lives was not the least bit similar, the change that happened to them had the same effect.

By *believe* I don't mean a head trip, as in agreeing with a set of beliefs or propositions that are put before us. We Americans are somewhat impressed with ourselves when polls reveal that well over 90% of us say we believe in God. I doubt if God is as impressed! The Letter of James in the New Testament asks, **“Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That's just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them?”**ⁱⁱ We know the answer, so by *believe* I refer to the more original meaning as that to which you give your heart.ⁱⁱⁱ We know that just about everybody says in their head, “I believe in God.” It's not so obvious that 90+% of Americans give their hearts to the one and only God.

Both Abraham and Nicodemus experience new birth, but each one hears God's call in a different way. For Abraham, it was more like a kick in the pants – **“Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's home and go to a land that I am going to show you.”** And Abraham did just that, even though he had no clue where he was going.^{iv} All he had was a promise from God to become a great nation which would be a blessing to the whole world. In reading this story, I can't help but think of all the families who have been told in recent times to leave their houses because they cannot make their mortgage payments. They had no choice as to whether to obey or not. They probably had no clue as to where they might go, nor would they have much, if any,

promise for the future.

At least Abraham had a choice. He could have ignored God and continued to enjoy life in Haran. Since it was good enough for his father, it would be good enough for him. He did not ignore God's call and so he upsets the peace and tranquility of his family.

Some years ago Bill Moyers conducted a series of conversations about the book of Genesis on Public Television. In discussing the story of Abraham, one of the participants said, "I can imagine Sarah waking up about four in the morning, hearing the bustling noises of Abraham packing. And Sarah says, 'What are you doing, Abe?' 'Packing.' 'What for?' 'Well, we're leaving.' 'Where are we going?' 'I don't know.' 'Why are we going?' 'Because He told me to.' 'Who's He?' 'He didn't tell me.' And then I could imagine Sarah calling her father; 'What am I going to do?' Her father says, 'I knew you shouldn't have married this nut.'^v

See what Abraham was up against? He had a promise from God but it was not a promise that life would necessarily be better in Canaan. Faithfulness to God can make life more difficult. One commentator reminds us, "Abraham is being called to father a new way of thinking, a new religious expression and a new people. He's told to leave behind land, birthplace and the house of his father – all the things that make it difficult to do something new – because otherwise he can too easily say, 'But this is the way we have always done it.'^{vi}

We all know the seven last words of the church – *we've always done it that way before!* It is the church's resistance to change that drives so many people away, especially younger people. We would all do well to resist change for the sake of change, but God help us not to resist the kind of change that comes from opening our hearts to the Spirit of God.

For Nicodemus, God's call came through a quiet stirring in his heart. He was brought up as a practicing Jew. He ascended to the rank of Pharisee. Maybe it was basically a head trip for him because he obviously was seeking for something more. Perhaps he was haunted by the ancient song of the Psalmist: **"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."**^{vii} "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee, O God," St. Augustine said.

Nicodemus had been observing Jesus actions and listened to his teaching, so in his restlessness he ventures forth to Jesus not asking a question, surprisingly, but making a statement. **"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."** Jesus responded with his own statement, **"No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."** That is, to see the kingdom of God requires new vision which can only be a gift of God's grace.

Nicodemus misunderstood and thought Jesus was talking about being born again, a literal second birth. **"How can anyone be born after having grown old?"** As a teacher of Israel, had he forgotten the story of his ancestral parents in the faith, Abraham and Sarah. They were as good as dead, the Apostle Paul would later write,^{viii} meaning Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was well past menopause when Isaac, the child of the promise, was born. Nicodemus seems to have forgotten that the theme song for Abraham and Sarah's journey was *Cast Your Fate to the*

Wind. Jesus didn't forget. **"The 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."** God's ways are totally unpredictable and unimaginable. Nicodemus had trouble wrapping his mind around that idea because he had been brought up to believe that God's ways were very predictable as they were spelled out in the law. "After all, that's the way we've always done it."

Since Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, presumably he goes back to his home in the dark, not only the dark of night, but in spiritual and intellectual darkness as well. One footnote – Nicodemus is usually criticized for coming to Jesus at night as if he didn't want to be seen doing so. However, the rabbis taught that the Torah was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day had subsided.^{ix} He may have been in the dark about many things, but at least he knew that honest seeking requires one to quiet any voice by God's and to be willing to think outside the box.

There's no indication a miracle of communication took place and that Nicodemus was instantly "born again." But the light was beginning to dawn, for later on we learn that Nicodemus comes out of his closet, or at least cracks the door, and cautions his fellow Pharisees about rushing to judgment against Jesus. **"Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"** He incurred more than a little sarcasm from them. **"Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee."**^x It's not easy to stick your neck out and make a minority report. Remember, faithfulness is risky.

After the crucifixion, he also assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial which meant lugging along about 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes.^{xi} You can't do that in secret. Such action puts him right out in the open for everyone to see. He was, slowly but surely, becoming a follower of Jesus.

Nor was Abraham instantly "born again." He had years of struggle and turmoil and tests of his faith – tests which he did not always pass. When he traveled in Egypt, he was so afraid the Pharaoh would kill him so he could take his beautiful wife, Sarah, for himself. What did Abraham do? He passed Sarah off as his sister in order to save his own skin. When no child was born from their marriage, Abraham turned to Hagar, his wife's servant. She bore Ishmael. When three visitors showed up outside their tent one day to tell Abraham and Sarah that they would indeed have a son, even in their old age, they both laughed and then denied that they did. And when Abraham answered the call to sacrifice his only son – a test he did pass – he saw a ram trapped in the thicket – a more than suitable sacrifice. There was no question as to why the ram was there. **"So Abraham called that place, 'The Lord will provide.'"**^{xii}

To know and trust God when trapped in the thickets of life is like being born from above; it is to "see the kingdom of God" even if you don't live fully in it. To honestly seek God with all your heart is to find God,^{xiii} even if it's one baby step at a time.

Only as Abraham ventured forth could he discover how the Lord provides. Only as Nicodemus dared to approach Jesus could he discover a faith to call his own. Christian faith is more about the journey than about the destination. I like the old bumper sticker: "Please be patient, God isn't finished with me yet!"

Many years ago when Bryant Gumble still hosted the *Today Show*,^{xiv} he interviewed Maya Angelou. He asked her if there was anything else she wanted to accomplish with her life.

"Oh, my Lord, yes," she answered. "I want to become a better writer. I'm very serious about it. It's what I am. It's how I describe myself to myself, and [I want to be] a better human being. I'm trying to be a Christian, which is no small matter. I mean it – I'm always amazed ... when [people] walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness.'"

I remember distinctly that obscure moment in morning television because I could resonate so much with what she said. Speaking for myself, I've often felt that in claiming to *be* a Christian I was claiming more about myself than I should. The name of Christ was given to me in my baptism at the-not-quite-ready-for-prime-time-age of 4-months. A gift of grace, indeed. Living up to that name, however, is another story. My so-called "Christian life" has had more ups and downs than the stock market. So I prefer to say that I'm trying to be a Christian and some days I'm more trying than others; some days I'm closer to being a Christian than others! I've also thought about saying I was a "becoming" Christian, but I'm not always very "becoming" either.

I'd love to hear the reason why the Lutherans call their fitness center up the street the *Becoming Center*. Could it suggest that physical fitness doesn't happen overnight but those who pursue the proper exercises are *becoming* more fit? Spiritual fitness doesn't happen overnight either, but those who practice the spiritual disciplines usually discover they are *becoming* more like Jesus.

Maybe you can identify the date and time of an experience that jump-started you on the journey, ala Abraham's swift kick from God. Maybe you think you've always been on the journey, attending church all your life and trying to do the things you've been taught. Maybe, like Nicodemus, you have wanted to move beyond only believing and doing the things you've been taught, but you've been afraid to buck tradition and think your own thoughts. The Spirit of God works through different people in different ways, but the Spirit of God is always working within us, whether we recognize it or not. All we have to do is to open our lives and give our hearts to the Spirit. That's the kind of change we can believe in because God will become more real for us and we will become more real for God and more genuinely human toward our loved ones and all our neighbors.

It's really like being born from above. We need such new birth not once in our lives, but every day of our lives and on some days, several times. We do not have the means to create our

rebirth any more than we could create our first birth, remember life and new life are gifts of God's grace, but we can engage in a bit of midwifery by daily remembering, "I am baptized."

Endnotes

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- i. The late Sydney J. Harris who was a well-known syndicated columnist.
 - ii. James 2:19 (*The Message*)
 - iii. For a more complete discussion of the difference, see Chapter Two of *The Heart of Christianity* by Marcus J. Borg (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003)
 - iv. See Hebrews 11:8
 - v. *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, Bill Moyers, PBS, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 162
 - vi. Wilma Ann Bailey, Christian Century, February 12, 2008, p. 18
 - vii. Psalm 42:1-2
 - viii. Romans 4:19
 - ix. *Late-night seminar*, Patricia Farris, Christian Century, January 30 - February 6, 2002, p. 19
 - x. John 7:51-52
 - xi. John 19:39
 - xii. Genesis 22:14
 - xiii. See Jeremiah 29:13
 - xiv. March 8, 1995