

A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, Year A
Genesis 12:1–4a; John 3:1–17
February 17, 2008
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Seeing is Believing is Seeing.

In our readings from the book of Genesis and John's gospel, we hear about two men who have an encounter with God: Abram, and Nicodemus. Their stories are important, and warrant a closer look, because, in many ways, those two men tell us something about ourselves.

In the reading from Genesis, we are introduced to a man named Abram – later, his name would be changed to Abraham – and we are told how God inaugurated a new chapter in his life, that would result in his becoming the acknowledged father of the Jewish nation, and the spiritual ancestor of all people who believed in God. Abram lived nearly 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. It was a time when a person's identity was defined almost entirely by his land and his extended family. Nothing was more important than your physical place in the world, and your clan. One day, and in only a few sentences, God tell Abram what's on his mind: "Pack everything up, because you're moving from your homeland, and your people, to an entirely different place that'll be your new home. There, things will go really well for you. And Abraham did as God instructed."

Abram was apparently a pretty spontaneous guy. Even though he had an established and settled life, and no problems serious enough to warrant mention, the minute God tells him to go, Abraham simply says "Okay."

Now, our Gospel reading tells us about a conversation that took place between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a member of the Pharisees, which was a sect of Judaism which stressed the preservation of a strict interpretation and application of the ancient laws of Moses; which means that he was a very religious guy, and traditions were very important to him. And he was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was a ruling council of the Jews; which means he was a man of power and influence. His identity, his place in life, I dare say, was wrapped up in his knowledge and his status.

Now, in order to understand the dynamics of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, we need to understand the context. Our gospel reading begins at John, chapter three, verse one, but this story is a continuation of what took place at the end of chapter two. In those earlier verses, John tells us that many people in Jerusalem believed in Jesus because they saw the signs and miracles he was performing. But John believes this type of faith falls has its problems. In fact, John tells us that Jesus didn't fully trust those people because he knew how fickle they were, and that their fascination with Jesus would last only until another miracle-performing wonder-worker came along. Jesus knew that people could be capricious, even people of faith, and we need to keep this information in mind as we think about the story in today's gospel reading.

Here's the story. One evening, Nicodemus comes to Jesus, professing a faith in Jesus that is based upon the signs and wonders he has seen Jesus perform. So, right off the bat, we know Jesus is going to be skeptical of the sort of faith that Nicodemus is professing. And, apparently not wanting to waste time with polite chit-chat, Jesus cuts right to the chase and answers the question that Nicodemus has yet to ask: "This is the truth, Nicodemus: No one can see the kingdom of God, let alone enter it, without being born from above, of water and Spirit."

Nicodemus' response to this statement, and everything else Jesus tells him, is confusion. "How can this be?" he says several times, because what Jesus is telling him goes contrary to what Nicodemus has learned. I won't go through a detailed description of their conversation, but I will tell you this: Nicodemus is not a spontaneous guy. Rather, he is a deliberate man, who carefully and cautiously examines everything, and subjects them to painstaking scrutiny before he can jump in and embrace them. And there's nothing wrong with being that way. However, unlike John's description of the calling of the first disciples, who seemingly drop everything and follow Jesus, there is nothing in our story that tells us with any degree of certainty that he actually got on board the "Jesus Train."

The contrast between Nicodemus and Abram really couldn't be any more clear. Even though they each have an encounter with God, that calls them to change the direction of their life, and change the way they look at life, one hesitates and the other doesn't. And each of us can probably identify with either Nicodemus or Abram.

I know that I tend to be more like Nicodemus than Abram. For example: show me something new, suggest a new way of doing things, propose a change in plans, and I need lots of time to think things through. My wife, Peggy, however, I think is more like Abram: suggest something new and, as often as not, she's out the door, with car keys in one hand, and pulling on her jacket with the other. It irritates me, sometimes, that my wife is so spontaneous. And it irritates her, sometimes, that I'm not. And the beauty of our relationship is that, after spending nearly twenty-four years together, I've become somewhat more spontaneous, and she's become somewhat more ... well, like me. And that's not a bad thing.

I think the difference between Nicodemus and Abraham, and people like them, is more than just a question of spontaneity. Nicodemus, it seems, lives by the rule "seeing is believing." Abraham seems to live by the rule "believing is seeing." Another difference between people like Nicodemus and Abraham, is the question of trust. Nicodemus and I aren't very trusting when confronted with new things; Abraham and Peggy are. A third difference, I think, has to do with the question of control. Nicodemus and I like to keep things well in hand; Abraham and Peggy find it easier to let go and, if you will, let God.

So what we have been presented with are two ways – and probably just two ways among many – of approaching faith and God, and the kingdom of God. Note that there's no hint of any condemnation of Nicodemus for his being so deliberate, or of Abraham for his willingness to pick up and go on a moment's notice. Nor is there any suggestion that one approach to faith and life is to be preferred over any other. But what these readings do imply, is that people approach

their relationship to God differently, that their faith in God may be based upon different standards, and that their striving towards the kingdom of God may take them along different paths.

For a number of years, the Episcopal Church has been embroiled in a controversy. Many point to the events of the 2003 General Convention – when the election of the first openly gay man to the episcopate was given the consent of the General Convention – as the genesis of our current crisis. That may be true, but what is also true is the fact that there have been many crises in the history of our denomination. There was crises surrounding the decision to allow women to be ordained, and when we ratified a new Book of Common Prayer. And I could go on. But the point I wan to make, and I may be oversimplifying matters, is that at the heart of these crises are two groups of people. On one side are the people like Abram who, when they're told that it's time to change things around, they're quick to say "Okay." And on the other side are the people like Nicodemus who, when they're given the same message, they're quick to say, "Now, wait just a minute. Let's think about that for a bit." And what's interesting to me is the fact that both responses are absolutely appropriate, and both are signs of a healthy church. Because the church needs people like Abram, who are open to the Spirit guiding them in new ways. And the church needs people like Nicodemus, who remind us that not every new way is necessarily a good way. And I think it's a mistake for any denomination to try to apply what I would call a homogeneous theology over the whole body of the faithful, because history has proven that it doesn't work. And because we're all different people, and the substance of our common life is made up of people like Nicodemus and Abram, and a vast array of people in between them. We do well to remember that being different is not the same as being wrong; sometimes, it just means that we're different.

Many of us might be tempted to dismiss or even criticize Nicodemus' profession of faith in Jesus because it was simply based upon the signs and wonders he's seen. Before we do that, we need to remember that Nicodemus stood up for Jesus when he was brought before the Sanhedrin and, with Joseph of Arimathea, provided a tomb and the materials necessary to prepare Jesus' body for burial. And many of us may be tempted to praise Abraham for his quick and easy faith in God. But before we do that, we need to remember that he had more than his share of problems down the road, many of his own doing, and he managed to get himself into a lot of trouble.

I think the message of today's lessons can probably be reduced to this: God comes to us through a variety of ways. He can come to us through miracles and signs and wonders, like with Nicodemus. He can come to us through the voice we hear in our heart of hearts, like with Abram. But those are only two of the myriad ways that God comes into our lives. And our task is to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open, because God will invariably can come to us, and others, in ways we least expect.

So whether you embrace the philosophy that "seeing is believing," or you embrace the philosophy that "believing is seeing," today's readings tell us that you're both right. For when your goal and aim is to know God, and to make him known, it's hard to go wrong.