

"Three Travelers"

Gen. 12: 1-4, Psalm 121; John 3:1-21

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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Family histories are fascinating. Why does one family stay in one place and another head off to the great unknown? What causes brothers to separate and go in different directions? What were the conditions in the ancestral neighborhood that led to migration? Was there someone who said - Clint Eastwood-style - "there's just not enough room in this town for the both of us"? Or was it some version of "Go West, Young Man, Go West" that echoed in the ear and caused an insatiable wanderlust to develop?

Often there wasn't enough of a land inheritance to share and it was the eldest son who kept the family farm in the "Old Country." Other siblings were forced to head off into the world to seek their fortune. This story was repeated over and over again as people made their way to America during the great periods of immigration.

Typically there is a great deal of the story that doesn't get recorded. Genealogists and family tree historians can be kept busy trying to put the pieces together to understand the social, economic, religious and emotional forces at work in a family's past. Their job is made that much more difficult when family names get changed along the way.

This happens in the Bible too. It won't be long before Abram is renamed Abraham. But for now he is still Abram.

Just before today's reading from Genesis, we learn that Abram's father Terah took him and the rest of the family from Ur of the

Chaldees to Canaan. In other words, from somewhere down near the Persian Gulf up past Baghdad and on up toward Turkey and then down around the Mediterranean toward Jerusalem. At least that was the plan. But when they came to Haran they stopped and settled there.

Why? The Bible doesn't say. It does tell us that one of Terah's sons was named Haran. It tells us that Haran died in the town of Ur. Did they leave Ur because of the circumstances surrounding Haran's death? Did they stay in Haran because once they got there they were far enough from Ur to make a new life without going to all the trouble of the longer journey to Canaan?

Again, we don't know. Had Terah also received a call from God to go to Canaan, a call that he didn't tell anyone about and didn't act upon? Once again, silence. We just don't know.

What we do know is that Abram received a call from God to get up and go. His ability to pull up stakes and go where God sent him has been used ever after to illustrate what is meant by "faith".

Because of Abram's faithful response to God's call the drama of the history of God's people is underway. It will be a story filled with nation-building, blessings and curses and continued traveling in response to the call of God.

Centuries later we encounter Nicodemus. Was he traveling to meet Jesus in response to the call of God? Was he seeking Jesus because of his faith or because of a need for faith? We do not know exactly what sent Nicodemus looking for Jesus.

But, we do know a few things about Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a leader and teacher among the Jews. To his credit,

he wasn't content with all the party line answers. He was a seeker after knowledge and truth.

He is searching for something. He is on a mission. Nicodemus isn't afraid to ask questions even if, in this scene at least, it's clear that he can't really comprehend the answers he receives.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. So much is made of "light" and "dark" in the Gospel of John that we know it is dangerous to read things only on a literal level. After all, that's what Nicodemus did that kept him from understanding Jesus when Jesus talked about being born "again" which can also be translated as "born from above".

John calls Jesus the Light of the World. John refers to those who are far from Jesus as dwelling in darkness. When people like Nicodemus come to Jesus, do they not come to him in a state of darkness? And, how they respond to Jesus goes a long way toward determining whether they remain in the dark or come to the light.

Nicodemus is on his way to coming toward the light. He believes that Jesus is a teacher sent from God, even if he doesn't confess Jesus is Lord. He believes that the signs Jesus performed in healing and miracles are further evidence that God is present in Jesus.

But it is also clear that Nicodemus is still far from able to understand or to accept in faith what Jesus is telling him about the role of the Spirit and the new life that comes from above.

As the scene unfolds we are led to believe that Nicodemus is hopelessly trapped in the need to understand things literally and

not spiritually. In their conversation, he and Jesus are on totally different planes, unable to talk the same language.

But their conversation is not wasted, certainly it is not wasted on us. We are also among those who are traveling toward God and are given the task of trying to make sense out of what Jesus says and does here and elsewhere.

One of the key learnings from this story is the reminder that the ability to comprehend spiritual truths is not based on how much knowledge or learning we may have. It is not based on our standing in the community or being an identified leader. It isn't even based on how close we are to Jesus.

Nicodemus had all those things and it wasn't enough. Jesus placed the responsibility for new life and a new relationship with God. It was the work of God's Spirit that, like the wind, blows where it wills without regard for our expectations or pre-conceived ideas.

The last time I checked, none of us were responsible for our own physical birth. That was something that was done to us. We didn't have a choice, we didn't have a say in the matter. Being born from above is no different. God is the primary mover and shaker.

And, if this is God's work, none of us side-lined or out of the running for a run-in with the Spirit. Something has brought us here out of the warmth of our homes, has taken us away from the Sunday paper or the TV or our hobbies or other pursuits and plopped us down right here, today.

Is it our questions that have brought us here? Our habits or our hopes? Whatever it is, we are now in a position to hear Jesus' words and to remember that we and Nicodemus and Abram aren't the only ones who are on a journey.

Jesus himself is also one who is traveling. Sent by God, sent because of the depth of God's love for each of us, Jesus has traveled from heaven to earth to show us a way out of our own dead end of self-help schemes and frantic, frenetic efforts to make ourselves lovable and worthy of God's attention.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that Christ died for us while we were still caught up in our sins. Jesus came at the right time and we are here at the right time to remember that his role is not that of condemning judge, but of merciful savior.

We are not off the hook, of course. There is a need for belief and trust and obedience to God and a response to the question of whether we will turn toward the light, come in out of the dark, be known as people of the light, children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ.

There are plenty of admirers of Jesus. There are plenty who stay at a distance, preferring to remain on the sidelines. The darkness increases the further we get from that center point of Christ.

There is always a need for followers, for disciples, for those who know they can never be as in love with God as God is with us, but who nevertheless try! As we travel through this Lenten season, by God's grace let us travel toward the light, toward the love that God gives us in Christ, toward a deeper level of commitment and

trust and faith, even if we don't know exactly where that will lead us.

Abram made the journey. Nicodemus started the journey. Christ finished the journey. Where are we in that walk?

Let us pray:

Lord God, you are the one who gave us birth. You have been our guide and our stay, our point of reference in all our journeying. We pray for your Spirit to fill us, to warm our hearts and to strengthen our resolve to continue this Lenten Journey of faith and devotion until all our journeys find their rest in you.

Amen.

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