

*Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3: 1-17
2 Lent/Year A
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Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing..."

Tossing and turning, unable to sleep, Nicodemus lay awake with a hundred questions rushing through his mind. Instead of getting up to flip on the television or read, he put on his coat and his shoes and he went out in search of the one responsible for his consternation. You see, Nicodemus was a theologian, a religious leader, a Pharisee. There was something about Jesus, about what he was saying and doing, something about his demeanor, his authority that was unsettling; yet deep inside Nicodemus there was a part of him, I believe, that understood that this new teacher was speaking the truth somehow and it was driving him crazy. //

For a man of his rank and stature within Judaism, it was very dangerous to be seen conspiring with a revolutionary; so in the middle of the night, he threw on his coat and shoes, he grabbed his torch near the door and set off to find Jesus. He needed to learn more, he needed to get answers to the questions that were racing through his mind, he needed peace and there was only one place to get it. Fortunately for him, Jesus was amenable to getting up in the middle of the night, throwing on his robe, putting on a pot of tea and answering questions.

You get the sense from reading our Gospel text this morning that Nicodemus was a man who was wrestling with his identity, with what God was asking him to do and be. Nicodemus was a powerful man, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court and legislative body of ancient Israel. There were only 71 seats on the Sanhedrin and Nicodemus had one of them. The stakes were high and he knew it. If he were to

advocate for the ideas that Jesus was presenting, it would most likely cost him everything, his status, his wealth, his very identity. Overnight he would become an outcast and he would lose everything that he had worked so hard to achieve. So Nicodemus stayed in the shadows.

John's Gospel is the only place in the Scripture where we hear about this man Nicodemus. The next time we run into him is chapter seven where he is found advocating among his colleagues on the Sanhedrin for Jesus to get a fair trial. Finally we hear from him again at the end of chapter nineteen, just after the crucifixion, where he and Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple, take Jesus down from the cross and prepare his body for burial.

Ultimately we don't know what became of Nicodemus, whether he eventually became a disciple of Jesus, a true follower, someone willing to come out of the shadows and stake his claim with those at odds with the religious culture that Nicodemus himself represented, or if he simply died with all the honor reserved for a man of his stature. //

Somewhere between 1800 and 2000 years before either Nicodemus or Jesus, there was the man who started it all by the name of Abram. The call of Abram, who would later become Abraham, the father of Judaism and by extension, Christianity, begins right here in the twelfth chapter of Genesis. After the passing of his father Terah, Abram is told by God to "go," to leave his country, his extended family, and his inheritance and "go," not know exactly where he was headed. Without any of the existential angst that was seemingly affecting Nicodemus and his internal debate with Jesus, Abram apparently just packed up his family and left everything remotely familiar

to him. The Scriptures tell us that he was 75 years old when he took his wife Sari and nephew Lot and headed toward the land that God would eventually show them.

We can of course speculate about what was going through Abram's mind as all this was taking place. He might have been concerned about how God was going to bring about this "great nation" from his descendents now that his wife Sari was way beyond childbearing years. At his age, he may have been concerned about whether he would be able to handle such a trip and all the unforeseen troubles that certainly lay ahead. But in spite of the irrationality of it all, Abram went because God told him to go and promised him that he and his descendents would be a blessing to the world.

This morning I juxtapose these two men, Nicodemus and Abram, side by side, because in the two of them we are able to catch glimpses of ourselves. In Nicodemus and Abram we see two individuals who are forced to wrestle with opportunities and choices, with their identities and their values. Nicodemus and Abram both felt deep down within their very souls, the presence and the call of a God who had a claim upon each of them. Nicodemus, at least from what we know of him in John's gospel, appeared to be very measured in his approach to Jesus. Could he be a disciple without giving up his position as a religious leader? He needed to understand for himself what he was willing to do and not do, what he was willing to give up and not give up. Did he have regrets at the end of his life? Who knows?

Abram faced the same issues as Nicodemus, but unlike Nicodemus, Abram went all in showing immense faith and trust that God's word was true and that it was enough to sustain him and his family on their journey. The decision to set out on a journey, not knowing where they were going, leaving behind all that they valued and knew seemed

irrational and perhaps even insane, yet that was the decision Abram made. Did he have regrets at the end of his life? Who knows?

You and I are here because deep down inside of us we sense the call of God as a claim upon us. As those who have been baptized into the life of Christ, we are indeed called to wrestle with opportunities and choices with our identities and our values. What is the measure of our faith? How far are we willing to go? How irrational and uncomfortable is the calling that God is making to us? Will we have regrets at the end of our lives? These are the questions that we need to wrestle with, and yes, they are uncomfortable, yet God is faithful to us and it is through God's immense grace that this wrestling, if we stay with it, will ultimately become blessing.

In Jesus Name; Amen.