

A Tale of Two People: Abram and Nicodemus

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral on Sunday, February 17, 2008.

Everyone who knows me has figured out that I am directionally challenged. The first time I went to the airport to pick up my son, using I-275 from Hyde Park, I ended up in Indiana—going north towards Cincinnati. Last year, nearly two years after I moved here, I got lost between the Cathedral and my own home when I tried taking a new route. So when I drive to a new place, I need to know exactly where I'm going, what lane to drive in, how many miles until the end, and how many traffic lights to go through. It is true that even with very precise directions I usually get lost anyway, but I need the reassurance of several maps to get me from one place to another. When facing someplace or something new, I am much more like Nicodemus than like Abraham.

This is a tale of two people. One, named Abram or Abraham, hears from God, who tells him, "Go to a new land." Abraham immediately obeys, no questions asked. He's the shining example of great faith and trust in God. The other, named Nicodemus, hears from Jesus who he knows comes from God. Jesus tells him, "Take part in a new birth." But unlike Abraham, Nicodemus questions Jesus: How? Why? He's an example of inadequate faith. That's the usual take on these readings: the contrast between a faithful Abraham and a wavering Nicodemus. Be like Abraham, don't be like Nicodemus, is our lesson. Or is it? What does that say to us about faith and obedience?

The Bible says that God told Abraham to go and off he went." If that's the whole conversation, it's a wonder that Abraham didn't end up in Indiana! Given how much Abraham talked and argued with God at other times, we might assume that there was a good deal of conversation or even arguing about his leaving, that the biblical writer left out. The point of this story is not that Abraham was right to take off without saying a word back to God. The real point is that he went, and trusted God.

On the other hand, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Enter the kingdom of God by being born new, of the Spirit." Nicodemus raises his hands in bewilderment: "I don't understand! How can this be?" The normal biblical scholarship gives him a generally bad press for his part in this conversation. But there's nothing wrong about Nicodemus asking questions except that he's *dense*—he can't think outside the box.

But I think that our first impressions of Abraham and Nicodemus may be too quick. We credit Abraham for simple unquestioning obedience, and we find fault with Nicodemus for demonstrating his ignorance—not seeing that we might have reacted the same way! But there is a danger here. Because if we believe that the lesson from Abraham and Nicodemus is about blind faith and blind obedience, then we end up in a spiritual Indiana—that is, lost and headed in the wrong direction. If we think that we need to be like an Abraham who obeys God blindly, or avoid being like a Nicodemus who questions what he hears from God, we misunderstand the nature of faith and trust. It is a mistake to think that faith means "Do as you're told and don't ask any questions." And it is a

mistake to think that trust means “I don’t need to do anything about my situation or the world’s ills, because the Lord will provide.”

Christian faith and Christian trust are neither blind nor unthinking. God does not want a mechanical relationship. That’s why God made people, not puppets. John says that God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but to save it. As somebody put it, God sent his Son into the world to save us from our sins, not our minds.

The stories of Abraham and Nicodemus, nevertheless, teach us important lessons about faith and trust that have nothing to do with being blind and everything to do with being open. This Lenten season, here is what we can learn from them:

First, listen for God, and discern what God is saying to us. We listen for God in our conversations with God (in prayer), our conversations with each other (in community), through meditation and reflection and by studying the Bible. God is all around us. Listen, be mindful of God’s voice, and think. Abraham and Nicodemus had some hard thinking to do. Real faith has to do with patient and thoughtful discernment of what God is saying to us, listening with all our heart—and with all our minds. Faith is hard work. It means asking questions, checking things out, talking with God.

Second, be open to surprises, to the unexpected, because that’s where God often beckons to us. Abraham and Nicodemus both faced life-changing decisions. Abraham looked to a new life in a new land; Nicodemus was challenged to look at new birth and a new relationship with God. Both needed to find the trust in God that let them leave behind old assumptions and to live a new way. Trust is hard work. It means being open to newness. We may need to let go of some things that we and the world hold dear—like success and prestige, power and self-image—so that we can receive the things that really matter, like God’s love and forgiveness and guidance.

And finally, keep in mind God’s promises. “I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you.” “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” God makes extravagant promises—divine love, divine blessing, and eternal life. But even if God’s promises seem unbelievable—and in your darkest times, you may think them unbelievable—live your life as if they are true. Jesus did. Jesus bet his *life* on the assurance that God loves us so much that God sees us worth dying for. For the rest of Lent, and the rest of your life, *that’s* a promise to live for.