
“Seeking: How do we begin again?”

A SERMON on Genesis 12:1-4a & John 3:1-17 for the 2nd Sunday in Lent, Year A
Preached 26 February 2023 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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During my university years, I spent my summers working for the IT tech support department at the local county government offices near where I grew up. With all of the different departments that the complex contained—municipal clerk, land registry, three different types of judicial courts, financial operations, parks and recreation, and even the county jail—the place was a real mishmash of different technologies. With the wide variety of systems in use there, we in the tech support office didn’t always know a whole lot more about any particular one of them than did the end user we were trying to help. Occasionally we knew an extra trick or two to try, but more often the biggest advantage we had was simply a bit more courage to try them. And I know this may sound rather cliché, but honestly, sometimes the trick simply is—lo and behold—just to restart the thing... the program, the computer, the printer, the computer *and* the printer, whatever. Any of you who have cable modems or WiFi routers in your house probably know this plenty well, too—sometimes you just have to restart the thing.

In a scene that played itself out any number of times, I’d say, “well, Sue, I’ve got it working now”... and often I’d get the question back, “well, what was wrong?”

“I don’t know”—an honest reply.

“Well, what did you do?”

“I restarted it.”

“Well I could’ve done that myself.”

And it’s true. Sue could have done that herself.

But she did not.

And, in some cases, depending on who Sue (or Jan or Brian) was, they *would* not.

After all, sometimes even doing something as seemingly simple just restarting the thing, a simple reset—*that* can seem too much.

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This morning, we have caught glimpses into the lives of two people who, in their different ways, were invited by God to press the reset button on all that was before. Perhaps this is easiest to see in Abram’s case, in the brief snippet we heard from the book of Genesis—the beginning of the much-longer story of the man that Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike would come to know as “father” Abraham.

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you,” the Lord says to Abram. And so, “Abram went, as the Lord had told him[.]” With basically nothing to go on other than God’s command (at least as far as the scripture tells it), Abram picks up and leaves behind everything he has known. Jewish bible scholar Richard Elliott Friedman reflects on the fact that the ordering here, which he renders as “your land, your birthplace, and your father’s house”—that, ultimately, it isn’t geographic, but emotional. “[I]f he has left his land, then *of course* he has left his birthplace and his father’s house. ... The three steps are arranged in ascending order of difficulty for Abraham. It is hard to leave one’s land, harder if it

is where one was born, and harder still to leave one's family."¹

Many, if not most, of us in this congregation are familiar with moving, with leaving behind hometowns and homesteads, whether temporarily or permanently. Yes, there are some of us in this gathering this morning who have been here in or very near Cloverdale their whole lives. But we're also largely a congregation of immigrants: from St. Catherine's and Swift Current, Burnaby and Brandon, North Vancouver and Nova Scotia, South Africa and South Korea and South-of-the-Border. Such mixed geographic heritage is not entirely unusual in modern times, and especially so here in metro Vancouver where something like 45% of residents were born elsewhere—and I don't just mean outside of the region, but outside of Canada entirely.²

The moves we make today—or those we've made in the past few generations—they are nothing compared to the sort of trek God commanded of Abram nearly 4,000 years ago.³ Even before social media, Zoom, and email, we had telephone calls and letters in the mail. *We* can drive or take a train or fly between distant locations with relative ease. But in the pasture lands and deserts of the ancient Middle East, going away meant truly going away. For Abram, following this command from God meant not just a renewal, but a total reset, a complete restart. And Abram was not exactly a spring chicken by this point: he was seventy-five years old, the scriptures tell us, when he got up and went forth.

Traditionally, Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike have lauded Abram as a shining exemplar of what it means to have faith. God said “go,” and Abram went. “No distrust made [Abram] waver concerning the promise of God,” the apostle Paul wrote in the New Testament's letter to the Romans, “but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what [God] had promised. Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness.’”⁴

In contrast, Nicodemus, who we met in the reading from the Gospel of John—Nicodemus is a much more complicated guy to try to pin down. People have not usually seen him as a shining example of faith. Across the centuries of Christian interpretation, people have tended to question his motives in coming to see Jesus. We have criticized him and his responses as close-minded and hard-headed. In fact, in one of the study bibles I have, the section heading on this story refers to Nicodemus as one who “listens but does not hear.”⁵

And yet, even though the Christian tradition has tended to be relatively hard on Nicodemus, I actually think he's the one with whom it's a lot easier to sympathize, or even identify. All of us come to a place like this one—this church, this gathering together to worship and share in community—we come here having heard some things about Jesus, perhaps having witnessed some sign that seems to point to the power and presence of God at work. And yet, still we come full of questions, full of doubts even.

You know what, though? That's o.k. It's even good. There was a famous physicist who apparently once said, “Anyone who *says* that they understand quantum mechanics does not understand quantum mechanics.”⁶ Faith is not all that different. Anyone who says they fully understand the things of faith clearly *doesn't* understand. When we grasp too tightly to it, we are

¹ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: with a New English Translation* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 49; emphasis added.

² Douglas Todd, “How many Vancouver residents were born in B.C.?” *The Vancouver Sun*, 29 March 2016; <https://vancouver.sun.com/life/how-many-vancouver-residents-were-born-in-b-c/>

³ Scholars are unable to identify dates for the life of Abram/Abraham with any precision. Best estimates place him perhaps in the vicinity of 1800 BCE, but even longer ago is certainly possible.

⁴ Romans 4:20-22, NRSV.

⁵ *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 4th ed.

⁶ Cited in Daniel Ruen, “From a Preacher” commentary for 12 March 2017, in *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching, Year A 2017* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 107. Emphasis added.

liable to squeeze all the life out of it. Questions and doubt are part of the journey. As one pastor puts it, “[Nicodemus’s] uncertainty and struggle are part and parcel of our Yes to God’s promises in Jesus Christ. [Our] struggle to understand and accept God’s grace is, in and of itself, necessary to the experience of God’s love. There can be no true Yes to God’s promises if there is not a simultaneous experience of doubt and uncertainty.”⁷

Here’s the thing, though. God does not leave us simply to dwell in the place of doubt and uncertainty. No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey—including whatever doubts or questions or hesitations you might bring—God welcomes you. Yes, absolutely! But God also loves you too much to simply leave you stagnant as you are. We are met ever and ever again with the invitation to reach down and press the reset button. We won’t necessarily figure it all out, but we will be able to keep going, keep working, keep living.

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Back to Abram, the scriptures do not tell us whether he had his doubts when he first heard that call and command to go, to move, to begin again. We *do* know from the whole of his story, though, that (as one preacher puts it), “You don’t have to be a goody-goody to function as an instrument of God. Like all of us, [Abram] is a flawed human being. But he receives a call from God, and he responds to that call, even though the response is imperfect.”⁸ The call and promises of God given to Abram “come like a bolt from the blue, an act of God’s grace alone; no indication has been given as to why or even whether Abram merits them.”⁹

Likewise, Jesus’ response to Nicodemus, as strange and even enigmatic as it seems, invited Nicodemus to see beyond his present understandings and journey into a yet deeper relationship with the living God in his midst. When he first came to meet Jesus, Nicodemus believed that the presence of God dwelt with Jesus because of the signs that Jesus is able to perform. Jesus invited him to see deeper into the reality that it’s not simply that the presence of God dwells with Jesus, but that in Jesus, the presence of God has come to dwell with him and all the world. Which, of course, includes us, today, my friends, too.

These invitations themselves, they are grace. They are the grace of One who bears us to new birth ever and ever again, in the midst of our doubts and our broken realities. They are the grace of One who loves nothing short of the whole world, the whole *cosmos*, even. They are the grace of the One who comes not to condemn, but to save.

Blessing and honour, glory and power, be unto God, now and forever. Amen.

⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁸ Eugene Rivers III, quoted in Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 157.

⁹ *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed., ed. Adele Berlin & Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford University Press, 2014), 29.