

John 3:1-17

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Genesis 12:1-4a

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 of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

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When Eric and I began

our two-year long learning

with the Living School,

it began with Fr. Richard Rohr

telling us it all starts with **un**learning —

unlearning some of what we've

generally accepted as true

to make open space for

new discoveries.

He said it's not about

scuttling and replacing
 everything old
 but honoring it
 by bringing what has value with you
 even as you make room
 for new learning.
 He calls it "include and transcend."

This can be really hard.

It means unlearning
 some of the things
 we might have learned as children
 and have always accepted
 about God, faith, and how it all works.

We include the lessons
 that still have value for us today,
 and we honor,
 even as we transcend,
 what's no longer useful.

We open our imaginations
 to how God speaks, moves,
 and leads us today,
 as adults in a world that is
 completely different
 than our childhoods.

Abram, Sarai, and Lot

were part of a tribal, nomadic family
 in what is modern-day, Iraq.
 Think of a family with the patriarch
 being like a warlord,
 armed and ready
 to protect his tribe
 but also needing to coexist
 with the other people
 they encountered.

Their security and provision
 and way of life —
 every support for thriving —
 was all contained within
 their tribal family
 for generation after generation.

There's no reason for us to think

they were monotheistic,
 so Abram is possibly meeting God
 for the first time,
 and he's being told to go
 and leave his family's protection,
 provision, and way of life —
 without even knowing
 where God is leading!
 It's crazy!
 It's an incredibly dangerous thing to do.
 But he goes.

What follows is a lot of
 space and time
 and movement
 between him leaving what he
 knows and relies on
 to the realization of God's
 promised blessing.
 It's a movement of trust and relationship
 that leads to a transformation
 that will bless the entire world.

Nicodemus is a product of God's
 world-blessing transformation
 through Abram and Sarai's offspring.
 He's a Pharisee,
 very well-educated in Hebrew scripture,
 secure in his position
 as part of what could be considered
 a mini-tribe within Judaism.

It's significant that Nicodemus
 comes to Jesus in the dark of night.
 He is a respected leader in the temple, after all,
 and Jesus has just come away from
 turning the whole temple market upside-down
 and chasing all the vendors out.
 It could be that he wants
 to keep the meeting secret.

But there's another reason
 for Nicodemus' dark-of-night inquiry too.
 In John's gospel,
 darkness is indicative
 of not knowing,

of ignorance,
of something needing to be learned.
Nicodemus is curious,
not understanding.
He wants to find out more —
to see the light.

Nicodemus' mind and spirit
are filled with knowledge
of their tradition
and it's laws and commands.
Jesus knows Nicodemus
will need space
in his head and heart
for transformation to happen in his life.
He needs to unlearn
what he's always accepted
about God, faith, and how it all works
so that he can make room
for learning something new.
He needs to start all over again
with a clean slate —
almost as if to be born anew.

I don't think Nicodemus is being cheeky
when he asks how anyone can
be born after having grown old.
I think he's genuinely confused.
The gist of his question
makes me think,
"Can old dogs learn new tricks?"
Can a Pharisee
learn new ways of knowing God?

And now, can the church,
with this story in which our faith
is so deeply rooted,
can we learn new
concepts of grace and love
and of God's sustaining presence
even in the midst of a world on fire?

Karen Armstrong is a religious historian

and the creator of
the Charter for Compassion.

She wrote:

One of the conditions of enlightenment [or transformation] has always been a willingness to let go of what we thought we knew in order to appreciate truths we had never dreamed of. We may have to unlearn a great deal about religion before we can move on to new insight.

In his School of Love,

Jesus teaches Nicodemus
and us

a spirituality of letting go —
of unlearning
what we *think* we know
about grace and justice,
love and redemption —
letting go of what we think we know
about God and faith and how it all works.

We have to have space

where Christ can work

transformation in us,

so that, like someone newly born,

we can begin to see the world

with fresh eyes and

an open heart and soul.

In one of our Lenten disciplines,

a daily devotion called Roots of Faith,

we are, as a community,

digging down to the

roots of our faith and examining

what we've brought with us

from our past tribal associations.

We're pulling up some of the

traditions and theologies

that have been layered over the top

of the native, indigenous roots

of our faith,

and we're preparing our soil

for new sacred understanding,

clearing the way for what is essential

in our spiritual movement —

being born anew

for spiritual transformation.

Under a starry, dark-of-night,
 middle-eastern sky,
 God invited Abram and Sarai
 to start all over again
 with a clean slate —
 almost as if being born anew
 into a journey of relationship and trust.

In a dark-of-night conversation
 in the shadow of Jerusalem's temple,
 Jesus invites Nicodemus into new birth
 with an open mind and
 into a new journey of relationship and trust.

And here, in the dark of late winter,
 as the darkness of war
 and climate catastrophe encroaches,
 our children want to teach us
 something new.
 Our Adult Forum is reading and discussing
 a book of letters written to the church
 by young people.
 What they tell us they need is new narratives —
 or old, deeply rooted narratives
 to be told in new ways —
 ways that address
 our experiences as adults
 in a world that is completely
 different than our childhoods.

It might look at first like the vandalism
 of turning temple tables upside-down.
 It might feel risky — like we're chasing out
 the vendors and hawkers
 of generations-old
 religious traditions —
 many of which
 no longer address
 the needs of our world.

But old dogs *can* learn new tricks.
 We can *unlearn* what no longer serves

and blesses us and the world.
Including and transcending
the layers and layers of old —
and being born anew.