

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento, California

I have to admit that I bring a lot of baggage to the readings today. With Abraham, I always remember Isaac. With the Gospel, I resist being told I need to be born again, because that phrase has been co-opted and misused by some Christians, who say you must be born again like them. They have a program for how to do it. A state of repentance. The sinner's prayer. Boom. Born again. So that's it. There's my baggage.

In the effort to lay my baggage down, I tried to take a new look at these readings. I tried to see their wider context, and then I tried for a better understanding of the metaphors used.

With Abram, it was helpful to place him within the Book of Genesis, and within the whole of salvation history. In the first half of Genesis, we see God reacting to the Eden debacle by cursing. He curses Adam and Eve. And Cain. When we get to Moses, God is ready to bring destruction on the whole earth. Finally, just before Abram, we get Babel, where God curses humanity with divided language.

But with Abram, we see God acting in a new way. What does he give him? Blessings. He asks Abram to leave his home and go to a new land and says he will make of him a great nation. He says "I will bless you, and make your name great, and you will be a blessing." And he adds "In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The story ends today without a word from Abram. "So Abram went, as the Lord told him."

This is a turning point in the long tale of God's interaction with humanity. God is trying a new thing. Blessings. He is also trying, again, a close relationship with individual humans. There is a block in the way of God's plans, we know from the previous chapter that Abram's wife, Sarai, is barren. In this short passage we don't get to see the relationship grow, as

Abram learns how to question and negotiate with God, and God learns how to listen.

We should notice how little we know here. Why Abram? We don't know why God made this choice, there is no explanation. Here at this point, it is God's wish and will to use blessings instead of curses, and to use Abram as the vehicle. You could say that Abram is born from above, born from God's wish and will.

Which brings us to Nicodemus. Several hundred years later, Nicodemus represents the children of Abraham. As a Pharisee, he represents careful, studious followers of the law. He also represents those children of Abraham who are impressed by Jesus, but don't know what to make of him. He believes that Jesus must be sent by God, because of the signs Jesus is doing. But he is unsure about what it all means.

Jesus responds "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again." Nicodemus is standing at the border of a land he can sense but cannot comprehend. Sometimes, in John, I feel like I hear an indistinct echo of a saying from the Synoptics. At this point I hear the saying that you must become like a little child to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Nicodemus shows how far he is from understanding Jesus' parabolic teaching style by fixating on the flesh and blood aspect of what Jesus says. Can you enter into the mother's womb a second time? Nicodemus' fixation on flesh and blood birth parallels the idea that being part of Israel relies on descent from Abraham.

Again, Jesus echoes the Synoptics by saying that those born to the Kingdom are born of water and the Spirit. Jesus brings, as John the Baptist promised, Baptism both by water and the Spirit. Jesus switches to a different meaning of born again, born from above, trying to shift Nicodemus' thinking. He also switches to another metaphor for Spirit, the wind. You can sense it, you can hear it, but that doesn't mean you understand where it comes from or where it is going. That is what it's like when you see those

who are born of the Spirit. But Nicodemus is baffled. Then Jesus says “Are you a teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?”

Here, remember Abram. We know God chose Abram as his instrument. But we don’t know why. Throughout the long story of Salvation, we see God choose whoever he wills. He chooses Jacob over Esau, the child Samuel as his prophet, and David over his brothers. Yes, God chose the children of Abraham to be the source of blessing for the whole world, but that doesn’t mean those children can predict how blessings will flow.

Up to now in this passage, it has been a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, and the pronouns are I and you, first and second person singular. But now, the pronouns shift. Sometimes it is still “I”, Jesus speaking, sometimes it switches to “We.” In Greek, the you clearly switches to you all, to second person plural. Jesus has shifted from speaking just to Nicodemus to speaking to a whole community. And sometimes it is, we, the Christian community, who seems to be speaking. “We speak of what we know, and testify to what we have seen, but you all do not receive our testimony. “

Then Jesus switches to a metaphor that all the children of Israel, including Nicodemus, should understand on some level, because it reaches back to the foundational story of Israel in the Desert. After yet another episode of doubting God, Israel was troubled by a plague of poisonous snakes, and many died. Israel repented, and God told Moses to make a bronze pole with a snake on it, and hold it up so everyone could see it. Those who looked at it were healed.

If Jesus were being clear, he might say something like this. There will be a sign, and like the snake, it will seem strange. An instrument of death will be lifted up and become an instrument of life. Like the snake, the Son of Man will be lifted up on the cross, and he will bring healing to all who look on him and believe.

Finally, after metaphorical sayings and cryptic utterances, Jesus switches to two clear pronouncements of God’s intent for the world.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

And “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world through him might be saved.”

Does any of this help with the baggage, the sticking points I brought to these passages? Well, nothing helps me with Isaac, not really. But the idea that Abram is the turning point where God begins to bless humanity is new to me, and helpful, and so is the reminder that from Abram on, God’s intent was to bless all the families of the world.

After looking at all the different metaphors Jesus uses to try to reach Nicodemus, I think people who insist that to be a Christian you must be a born again Christian are making Nicodemus’ mistake. They have tried to solidify a metaphor and turn it into a formula for how to be saved. Better to remember what today’s stories show us. God’s reaches out to Abram and to all of us. God’s will for us is to bless us. God loves us, God heals us. God saves us through his Son, and gives us new birth through water and the Spirit. Even so, we need to be open to the idea that God might choose to send blessings in new and unpredictable ways.