

“Abundant Living Amidst Transitions”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Second Sunday in the Season of Lent, March 16, 2014

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Scriptures: Genesis 12: 1-4a John 3: 1-17

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

Nicodemus Visits Jesus

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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 apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹"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. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶"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. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

This week we have been blessed to have our daughter home for Spring Break.
When Katie was two-years-old,
my wife Betty was sitting down in the den, reading.
Katie ran up to Betty wearing her favorite blanket wrapped around her shoulders.
Their conversation went exactly like this:

Katie: I'm getting married.
Betty: *Oh, you are. Who are you marrying?*
K: I'm getting married.
B: *Yes, I know. But is anyone else getting married?*
K: No, but her sick. (Points to her tummy)
B: *Who is sick?*
K: Mary.
B: *Oh, you're Mary?*
K: No, I'm not married.
B: *But you're getting married?*
K: Yes! Good-bye, Mama! (And she runs off.)

Have you ever noticed that two people can be speaking the exact same language,
can have known each other for years,
can be doing their best to communicate with one another,
and still end up talking at cross purposes?

Listen closely to the conversation between Jesus of Nazareth and Pharisee
Nicodemus:

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus,
a leader [and teacher] 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
apart from the presence of God."*

Jesus met Nicodemus half way.
This is no chance encounter; both have a deep need to connect.
Both souls reach out to the other.
Each has something to offer; each has something to receive.
So they meet one another at night.
How many of us have had a heart-to-heart talk with God
in the middle of the night?
Why is it that in the middle of the night, in the stillness and dark,
we find the honesty and starkness
of face-to-face, heart-to-heart, soul-to-soul encounters?
Whether in the stillness of the night or in dawn's first light
we find privacy, stillness, fewer distractions,
and possibly greater focus and concentration.
In the night we stop our running, take a respite from our busy-ness,

and allow our wrestling, our struggles, our questioning to float to the surface.

God meets us there, in the dark, in the night, in the solitude, in the turmoil.

Based on the testimonies found in the Holy Scriptures
and the stories of the millions

who have encountered Christ in the nighttimes of their lives,
we can safely and boldly claim this eternal truth:

First, God loves to meet us in the heart of our struggle.

Further, God already knows the questions, the doubts, the challenges,
and the faith that bubbles up from within.

Finally, God opens the doors and windows wide for us
to have a connection with the holy;

Christ certainly appears to be visible and available for each of us
to have a continuous conversation with the Messiah and one another;
for us to have the confidence, the faith that affirms
that God is alive and at work, day and night.

And how many of us have had a “Come-to-Jesus-meeting” with our Creator,
only to hear new talk, new ideas, new ways of seeing and being
that opened our eyes and changed our minds?

Jesus and Nicodemus reached out to one another.

Jesus the rabbi/teacher sat with the student/teacher Nicodemus;
Jesus the wanderer encountered an established religious leader.

Jesus, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end,
opened the mind and altered the life
of a most practical and grounded Nicodemus.

Jesus said to Nicodemus and He says to us today,
*“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born from above.”*

Nicodemus misunderstood the statement of faith, as many of us have,
and took it literally, saying,

*“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,

*“What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.
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.”*

The fresh winds of the spirit of God cannot be contained, explained, or detained.
The winds of the Spirit will blow and move wherever God wills.

The newness of the Spirit that God provides in abundance
is more like a birth canal, a fresh start, a clean slate, a first step on a

journey.

Every new transition begins with an ending.
Something has to be let go for a new beginning to get launched.
Sometimes that which we let go is our own shyness, fears, insecurities, or doubts.

Last week I had my very first banjo lesson,
 having finally tapped into the courage to dust off a banjo
 I've owned and stowed for thirty years.
The next day I bumped into an accomplished master guitarist.
I tentatively shared with him my new adventure,
 to which he quietly responded, "*We all had our first lesson once.*"

His gentle recognition that we have all had to start sometime, somewhere,
somehow
 made me feel so good and so encouraged.
Who needs to hear you say to them, "*We all had our first lesson once*"?

We are always a bit raw, a bit ginger, a mite hesitant
 when starting something new,
 when we dare to trust the Spirit of God
 to move us in new directions and missions.
We have all had our first moments of transition,
 initial halting steps, new beginnings that don't look like much at first.
There is a terrible temptation in our culture
 to pull up seedlings to see if they've taken root.
Let the seedlings have time and love and water and light to grow.
Relationships are so much like seedlings.
Be patient with one another.
Give new beginnings time and light,
 love and room to grow,
 time to send down deep roots and send up bright shoots.

A car in traffic had a bumper sticker that read, "*Born Fine the First Time.*"
Hey, when you see the driver of that car, please deliver this message.
"Yes, you are born fine the first time.
 Yet life in God's loving grace and embrace isn't 'one and done.'
Thanks to the abundant grace of God, every time you learn you are born
again.
Thanks be to God, we can be born again and again and again and again."

Do you believe that every time we forgive and are forgiven and given a fresh
start,
 we are born again?
Isn't that what it feels like, deep inside?
Jesus said we should forgive not once or 7 times, but 70 times 7.
Can you be born again, from above, 490 times?

What do you think?

I shudder to think of the alternative of divine renewal –
emotional death, physical distance, and spiritual hopelessness.
God empowers us to change and grow and learn,
to have our minds and lives expanded,
to be forgiven and redeemed and filled anew.
Not once or twice, but again and again and again.

The Good News is that Jesus Christ meets us where we are, half way or all the way,
in the night and in the light, alone or in a bustling city,
and claims us for His own.

Our own Mary Frances Early was the first African-American graduate
of the University of Georgia, enrolling to earn a Master's Degree there in
1961.

Various groups at UGA invite her to return to speak and share her story.

She has spoken to groups ranging from thirty students to 1,000,
from elementary schools to the entire UGA commencement.

She has been honored and thanked for her achievement
and the significance of her accomplishment in the early 1960s.

In 2009, a faith-based group in Athens invited her to speak.

That day she was tired and didn't feel like going,
but she went anyway and shared her experiences.

The next day she got an email from a student.

He said that while she was speaking
he discovered that he was sitting by the 1961 president of UGA's student
body.

Mary Frances Early wrote an email back, asking, "*Has he changed?*"

The student replied, "*No.*"

Two score and 14 years later and one of our neighbors is still stuck in 1961!

What do you believe now that you didn't believe before?

Isn't that what Nicodemus was wrestling with?

How do you think that worked out?

Have you changed recently?

How have you changed in the last five years?

How about in that last five days, or five minutes?

Sometime this week live with these questions:

What do you believe now that you did not believe just a few years ago?

What happened to change your mind, your attitude, or your beliefs?

Specifically, who or what opened your eyes?

We tend to think that our stubbornness

speaks to the power of the Gospel.
Whereas it is much more likely that the power of the Gospel
addresses our stubbornness.
Sometimes change comes when we make a choice
to leave our fear of scarcity behind
and live into the abundance of God's love and grace.
Sometimes change comes when we are forced to make a choice.
Sometimes change comes in the midst of transitions and upheavals,
disruption and confusion.

We like to think that faith in Jesus Christ saves us from chaos,
suppresses disruption, and obliterates misunderstanding.

Au contraire!

Faith in Jesus Christ is our comfort, our protection, our blessing, our redeeming
grace.

Faith in Jesus Christ empowers us to cope with life's challenges.

The Good News is that the abundant grace of God enables us to trust,
to trust that God is with us,
to trust that God is present in times of transition,
periods of change, and experiences that stretch us.

When Nicodemus left Jesus that night, he had a lot of thinking to do.
The Pharisee had to choose if he was going to let into his soul and life
the abundant grace of Jesus Christ.

Oftentimes in the Bible we only catch a part of the story;
we don't always learn where story endings and beginnings shake out.

Interestingly enough, Nicodemus re-enters the story.
Nicodemus appears later on in the 19th Chapter of the Gospel of John.
We learn that Nicodemus returned again to encounter his Jesus.
Only this time Jesus of Nazareth was dead.
He had died after being crucified on a cross on Calvary.
Joseph of Arimathea was given permission from Pilate to bury Jesus' body.
The Pharisee Nicodemus returned,
testifying with his presence and actions that he was all in,
that he dared to be seen with his Lord and Savior in the light of
day.

Nicodemus "*came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes,
about a hundred pounds weight.*"
They prepared Jesus' body in the burial custom of the Jews,
wrapping him in linen cloths with the spices,
and then they placed him in a new tomb in a garden. (John 19: 38-
42)

Surely they thought the story was ending,

that there were no more transitions to be had,
only to discover on Easter morning
that the abundant grace of God had only just begun.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!