

Bold Blessings

Genesis 12: 1-4a

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.

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 apart from the presence of God.” 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 a 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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God gives bold and mighty blessings. It is God’s mightiest and boldest blessing that we are journeying towards during Lent as we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem, Gethsemane and Calvary, but God has always been offering bold blessings.

Our biblical primeval history, the creation of the world, the Fall, and the Flood, brings us to Abram. Abraham who will become the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is a 10th generation descendant of Noah living in Ur, a land steeped in idolatry. Abram was a man with no knowledge of the true God or the plans and purpose God had for the broken and divided

humanity until suddenly, mysteriously, this childless man hears a voice with a wild, daring, unexpected, and bold command, lavish promises and extraordinary reward.

“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.”

You do not know me, yet I am asking you to leave behind everything you have ever known. Your family relationships, that most important part of your cultural life, just leave it, just walk away. Leave behind your home and your community, your language and your lifestyle. Go to another place and people far away. When you do this I will reward you not only now but for every generation yet to be. You do not know me but I have chosen you as the father and the face of what will someday be three of the world’s major religions.

The reasons God seems to have just plucked Abram from obscurity and into religious stardom are unknown at this point in our Scripture as it is only as Abraham and Sarah’s lives go on that it becomes evident that theirs is a life of faith and obedience. If there was any discussion or doubt, any hesitation, our Scripture is silent.

God offers bold blessings but God can also ask for bold commitments and trust, ask for things most people would run away from or at least be slow to warm to, would turn a deaf ear to at first. God can have expectations beyond our wildest imagination, our grandest dreams. God has been calling people to pick up their cross and carry it long before Jesus lived as one of us among us. It’s just not typical to have such a clear ask and go as Abram, as Abraham, did. Moses doubted he was right for the task because of his speech impediment. Jeremiah thought he was too young. Jonah literally hid in the belly of a whale before accepting God’s call to prophecy. Esther needed to be persuaded that she was the one chosen for such a time as this. Yet each of them, and many others, became the heroes of our faith ancestors.

Many people who hear God’s call to a life of faith and a particular purpose respond and say yes only after whispers, nudges, pushes, hesitations, uncertainty and reflection. That is not necessarily a questioning of faith as much as the ability, confidence, time, and capability to such a depth of commitment. Most of us could see ourselves reflected in Nicodemus’ story much more than Abram’s call. Hearing God’s bold call, receiving God’s bold blessing is for most people a journey and a process, not a reflex.

As we first meet Nicodemus in John’s gospel it is under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus is a well-educated man and a man of deep faith as a Pharisaic Jew. He upholds every letter of the law – both God’s and man-made ones. He is a faithful and moral citizen of the community. He is also a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Like Saul will do in the decades following Jesus’ life until the radical experience that transforms him into Paul, Nicodemus is absolutely against everything that Jesus stands for. The carpenter’s son is an itinerant false prophet with a group of followers who only follow the spirit of the law, not the literal law, and that is blasphemy.

Yet something has happened to Nicodemus, something has stirred up his spirit, something that he is not able to get off of his mind, or resolve with Scripture, knowledge and prayer. And it is certainly not a questioning he will share with anyone he knows. Everything Jesus is doing is wrong, but there is a part of Nicodemus that is beginning to doubt that. Afraid of being seen and recognized, afraid of not finding answers to what is keeping him up at night, he comes to Jesus in the shadows. The nighttime not only hides him and his questions, it is certainly symbolic of stumbling because there is no light in him and he just can't see the way forward.

In *Daytime Lives and Nighttime Lives*, Michael Marshⁱ comments that 'Nicodemus "came to Jesus by night"'. I wonder if that's not true for all of us. I wonder if we don't all come to Jesus by night.

Coming to Jesus by night is not a statement about the time, Nicodemus' motive, or his faith. It is, rather, a description of Nicodemus and his life, a description that probably fits all of us at one time or another.

By day Nicodemus knows who he is. He has an identity. He is a Pharisee. He has a role and a reputation as a leader of the Jews. He knows and applies the law. People listen to and follow him. He has a particular place in society. He fits in. He has security and power.

By night, however, Nicodemus is lost and confused. He cannot see or understand. Nothing makes sense. He's in the dark, as we say. His work, accomplishments, reputation, and place in society no longer provide stability or answers. Everything has changed. He's stumbling in the dark. Daytime certainty has given way to nighttime questions. "How can these things be?" By day he keeps the faith. By night, however, his nets come up empty. He's looking for something the daytime life just cannot give him."

The restlessness that brought Nicodemus to Jesus at night for light, for answers, was the beginning of a bold purpose from God and a bold blessing. In time Nicodemus will dare to defend Jesus at the Sanhedrin, and after Jesus has been crucified, he will join Joseph of Arimathea in anointing Jesus' body for a proper Jewish burial with spices and strips of linen he bought in order to do so before they laid him in a tomb.

On our Lenten journey we are reminded of the bold commitments and trust that God asks from us just as much as God offers us our own bold blessings. However we come to understand and respond to God—with the quick and instant ease of Abraham or like Nicodemus after the dark exploration of a new birth through the One who gives eternal life, we know that what God calls us to do, God blesses us to do. Like Abraham and like Nicodemus we are called into an amazing and life-changing adventure with God. Amen.

ⁱ <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2014/03/17/daytime-lives-and-nighttime-lives-a-sermon-on-john-31-17/>