

A Holy Invitation
March 30, 2014
Genesis 12:1-9
John 3:1-13, 16-17

This morning we have one reading from each Testament. In each, God offers a holy invitation.

The first invitation is given to Abram and Sarai who later become Abraham and Sarah. These mature adults are at the stage of life when they are considering making Southwest Florida their year-round residence – not at an age when they are seeking a new adventure.

The second invitation is given to Nicodemus. This well-established religious leader knows who he is and what he believes. He is used to being listened to as an authority not challenged to start over.

Listen now for the call of our Still Inviting God in the words of these two well-known biblical accounts.

From Genesis Chapter 12

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. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

From John Chapter 3

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.

"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.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. God of the Ages and Lord of our lives, help us to recognize the wind of your Spirit as it blows freely in our midst. Remind us that wherever we are on our journey, you are present there. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Learning has always come easily for me. I breezed through high school, excelled in the final years of college, and earned my graduate and doctoral degrees with distinction. In sharing my academic story I intentionally omitted the less than pretty part that came early in my college experience when I encountered Professor Berrier.

When I registered for Old Testament Survey I looked forward to learning more about the First Testament. The course catalog offered one of the shortest, sweetest, and - in my mind - easiest descriptions imaginable: "An introduction to the story of the Bible as it unfolds in the Old Testament."

Clearly my definition of introduction differed dramatically from that of the professor. I envisioned reading excerpts of familiar passages, hearing how historians helped connect the stories to the wider world in which they happened, and learning to pronounce a few of the many seemingly unpronounceable people and places found in the first part of the Bible. The professor expected that students arrived in the course with knowledge that exceeded what I imagined I might learn as a result of taking the class. He required that we become very familiar with the content and context of all 39 books of the First Testament, and confident in explaining how various parts fit together. It seemed to me that the course was designed to ensure every student became a seasoned biblical scholar in a single semester.

While I firmly believe that everyone needs a humbling Professor Berrier type experience, I sure didn't feel that way 20 years ago. Thankfully, there were a few parts of the course that made complete sense to me. Perhaps the most memorable of all was the importance of the first half of this morning's first reading. It is a call narrative - God uses it to call two retirees into a new reality that will forever change their lives and the lives of their descendants.

This passage is the dividing line in the book of Genesis. The first eleven chapters leading up to it tell the story of Israel's primeval

history or, if you will, pre-history. In case you need a refresher these initial chapters of the First Testament includes

- both creation accounts: our shared stories of beginnings;
- the fall: the account of Adam, Eve, and serpent that introduces sin;
- the first murder: a family affair in which Cain killed his brother Abel;
- the end of the world as it had been known to that point: a flood in which all that survive does so through Noah and his ark;
- and a new beginning that led to more rebellion including people seeking to become like God only to see God intervene and confuse everyone's languages at the Tower of Babel.

That is the Bible as we know it prior to this morning's first reading. Immediately thereafter chapter twelve begins with some of the best known words in all of the Torah. In just a few verses God makes three incredible promises to Abram and Sarai:

1. God will provide a land their descendants will call their own;
2. God will ensure that their descendants will become a great nation; and
3. God will make it so that through their descendants all families on earth will be blessed.

With these promises God is setting in motion a new vision for humanity. The future starts with this couple, but they are only the beginning.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, a Presbyterian minister who taught for many years at Union Theological Seminary, explains the significance in this way:

We are introduced here in these three little verses to the universal purpose of God for all people, and Abraham is called to leave his home in Mesopotamia not because he is especially privileged, but because the Lord God wishes to bring his blessing on every one of us. It is a long and complex story, this story of God's working for us. It has its heights and depths, and it seems as if we will never come out right. But God has spoken his word to Abraham, and God always keeps his promises.¹

¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier. "Genesis 12:1-9" in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts – The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts*, ed. By Roger E. Van Harn (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), p.

This speaks to one of the most significant biblical themes, which some label “salvation history”. All Abram and Sari know is that this opportunity is one they cannot pass up.

Their “yes” to God’s holy invitation means that everything will change – nothing will remain as it has always been – not even their names. Their “yes” unlocks three seemingly unthinkable promises and sets in motion a previously unimaginable future. While they cannot logically fathom how as a childless couple in their 70s they will begin a family or experience these blessings, nonetheless they start where we all do by trusting God and putting one foot in front of the other.

But I am getting ahead of myself. For now, what matters most is that God intervened, and provided an invitation.

The same is true in this morning’s second reading from John’s Gospel. In that instance, however, the invitation is presented by Jesus and packaged quite differently.

While most of us know of Abraham and Sarah, I suspect fewer are familiar with Nicodemus. From this passage we know he is a religious man – a Pharisee. Not only that, but also that he is a well-established religious leader – the kind who would not seek out the counsel of someone like Jesus who lacked the appropriate training to be looked upon as a teacher. And yet, he does just that. He seeks out Jesus to learn more about him – to see if what he has been hearing about all that Jesus is doing has any merit.

He comes to Jesus at night. While scholars like to argue about whether this is so that no one will see him doing so or if it was because it was common for teachers to study and debate well into the evening, these possibilities miss what mattered to the author. John uses the word “night” on several occasions (9:4, 11:10, and 13:30) to indicate separation from the presence of God. This meaning is clear in our passage as well if one reads a few verses beyond where I stopped reading. (see verses 19-21).²

So, Nicodemus quizzes Jesus about just who Jesus is. As is often the case, Jesus never quite gets around to answering the question he was asked. Instead, he uses this occasion to offer Nicodemus – and

² Gail R. O’Day. “The Gospel of John” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes – Volume IX* (Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 548.

through him others – an invitation. Jesus invites Nicodemus to be born again.

As someone who grew up in the Bible belt, I have a reaction every time I hear the phrase “born again.” Over the years, I was asked on many an occasion if I had accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior and been born again. The people who were asking assumed that being born again meant that I had made a willful decision to follow the Way of Jesus and could give them my spiritual date of birth – a date just as real and just as specific as the date of my physical birth documented on my birth certificate.

While most such questioners approached me with good intentions, they missed a part of what Jesus envisions when he invites Nicodemus to be born again. The Greek word used is one that has a double meaning for which there is no one word equivalent in English. The word means both “from above” and “again or anew.”

When Jesus offers a holy invitation to be born again the word he chooses has a clear double meaning – he intends the hearer to know he means both/and not either/or. Jesus uses a word that “speaks of both a time of birth (‘again’) and the place from which this new birth is generated (‘from above’).”³

Like most of us, Nicodemus also missed or ignored the double meaning. He focused on the meaning Evangelicals favor, but applied it in a literal manner stating the absurdity of the idea that he or any grown man could ever re-enter his mother’s womb in order to exit for a second birth.

Jesus clarifies his intent. He rephrases the invitation alerting Nicodemus that no one enters the realm of God unless he or she is born of water and the Spirit. Put more directly, the born again experience Jesus envisions requires the waters of baptism not the waters of a birth canal. It also requires the presence of God’s Spirit.

Yet again John uses language to both clarify and broaden the scope of what Jesus is offering. The Greek word used for Spirit can mean either Spirit or wind. God’s wonderful wind blows freely and isn’t easily explained; the Holy Spirit and baptism come together whenever one is born from above - born again.

³ Ibid., p.549

And then we find our way to the best known verse in all of Scripture. It is the only one consistently seen on signs waved about at sporting events and shared in casual conversation by chapter and verse: John 3:16.

God's incredible love – the love that led God to make those amazing promises to Abraham and Sarah – resurfaces. This time around God's invitation in John 3:16 comes with an even more amazing promise: eternal life.

This morning's readings recount two of the most incredible invitations ever offered. These are less about the one receiving the invitation, and more about the God who issues the invitation.

Now that we are well into our Lenten Journey on this the third Sunday of Lent, we have had plenty of time to struggle what it is we want to do or to avoid doing for these 40 days. Whether we have been faithfully keeping those disciplines or irregularly attentive to them, we have reached a point when we need to be reminded of the very real presence of a Still Inviting God in our lives.

And this directs me back to our readings –back to those who received the invitations.

In Genesis, Abram and Sarai respond immediately. They set aside retirement, gather their belongings, and set out on the journey. As they travel, they make multiple stops along the way to erect altars.

Bruce Epperly, a UCC pastor and theologian, suggests:

Abram and Sarai erect altars of transformation at each stopping place. At first, the altars are erected to lure God to join them on the journey; after all, gods were localized to geographic places. Later, I believe the altars were built to remind them that God was with them wherever they might sojourn. Abram and Sarai experienced an evolutionary leap in theological reflection: God is unbounded and global, not just tribal and regional.⁴

The Genesis reading ends with the couple still on the journey – still responding to God's invitation – still moving toward the realization of God's promises – still experiencing God.

⁴ Bruce Epperly. "The Adventurous Lectionary for the Second Sunday in Lent: March 16, 2014." <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2014/03/the-adventurous-lectionary-march-16-2014/>>

And, what about Nicodemus? It turns out that this was the first of three times he appears in John's Gospel.

- The next time he stands up for Jesus among his fellow Pharisees, advising them to hear Jesus out before judging him (Chapter 7).
- The final time he appears follows Jesus' death. Then and only then does Nicodemus clearly and publically identify as a follower of the Way of Jesus (19:39).

We have heard much about the holy invitations received by an elderly couple and an established leader. Their responses are uniquely theirs, yet must also serve as examples that inspire us.

What is God doing here in our midst this morning?

- God is Still Speaking.
- God is Still Inviting.
- God is Still Promising.

This very God – our God – is patiently waiting on our responses. Knowing this, we affirm that

- we trust that God honors instant responses – like those of Abram and Sarai;
- we trust that God welcomes gradual responses – like that of Nicodemus; and
- we trust that by the ever-blowing wind of God's Spirit, God guides us now and always.

Amen.