

Finding the Road Home
Genesis 12: 1-4a & John 3: 1-17

Second Sunday in Lent/ 17th February 2008

After hearing these two texts, you're probably thinking that the sermon title sounds a little odd. After all, doesn't God ask Abram to *leave* home and "Go"? Isn't he already home, in his ancestral home of Haran? Isn't it precisely this home that Abram is asked to give up in order to venture to some uncertain place? Leave your country, leave your family, leave the safety of your father's house – that is, give up your identity, your family name – leave all of this and venture into an unknown land, summoned by this unknown God who speaks with an unfamiliar voice, a voice that compels Abram to give up his former gods in order to worship Yahweh and go where Yahweh leads in order to become a blessing for the nations, a blessing for many.

In order for the blessing to take place he has to leave home. In order to receive the blessing there has to be a leave-taking. In order for the blessing to be real he has to give up his life as he knew it and embrace the unknown life of Yahweh. In order for Abram to become Abraham, meaning a father of nations, he had to leave home.

That's what happens when God speaks to us. It happens every time. Once God speaks, we can't go back to normal. Once God speaks, we can't go back to life as usual. Every time God utters a word and communicates with us, there is a sense in which we can never go home again, that something has changed, shifted within us, within our perspective of the world. Every time God speaks something new is called into existence and our lives are propelled forward to a new place. That new place is ultimately the place of blessing – even if it's a difficult path or a difficult place – the promise is offered. But in order for us to experience it, we have to embrace the call, listen to the voice, venture out, leave home in order to arrive at we might call a better home, or our true home. Home is forward; for the Bible, home is future.

What do I mean by home? Not a place or a dwelling, but *state*, a state of mind and heart where we know we belong, that feeds our souls, where we feel alive and life makes sense and has meaning. It's authentic life, true life, abundant life, rich life. God's live. That's home.

Sometimes we think we're already home – satisfied with our life as we know it, pleased with our accomplishments, our families, our comforts, our portfolios. Sometimes we think we already understand what our lives are about and have given a lot of blood, sweat, and maybe tears to it. That is, until that day, that moment when God speaks, when God calls, when God shows up and all of us sudden what we thought was life, was not life at all; when we discover who we *really* are, which can be found only in the presence of God, the old self, that false self gives way to the new self, the true self; when you realize that what you thought was home was not really home at all, but something far less fulfilling. Sure, it was secure and safe and familiar, but it wasn't home.

Consider Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, an accomplished man, well-educated, with considerable power and influence. Just imagine what his career track must have looked like to get that position. Imagine what it must have felt like for him, in his heart and his

mind, leaving his home and going to the home of Jesus, at night – so no one would see him – to ask questions, vocational questions, big, LIFE questions he couldn't risk posing in the light of day. So Nicodemus goes at night – our own, *Nic at night* – seeking answers of Jesus: Who are you? How do you do the things you do? He wants answers, but expects answers that will make sense in his current frame of reference, in his world as he knew it. He was not prepared for the journey he was asked to make that night, he was not prepared for the leave-taking required to understand this Jesus.

In a sense, Nicodemus is looking for a kind of “home,” a new home for his faith and life with Yahweh. A new home, *not* in the sense of wanting to become a Christian instead of being Jewish, but a follower of Jesus, of his way, *within* Judaism.

In order for Nicodemus to really understand, to “see” the kingdom of God, to “see” the gracious rule and power of God at work through Jesus, something is first required. “No one can see the kingdom of God,” Jesus says to him, “without being born again,” or literally, “born from above.” “How can anyone be born a second time and be born?” Nic says. This is a response that suggests that he was not willing to leave home just yet. His frame of reference, his “home,” was inadequate to the challenge before him. The reason he cannot see the kingdom at work in Jesus is because his frame of reference is not big enough. What he doesn't understand or perhaps forgot is that human knowledge knows human things, only the gift of divine knowledge can allow humans to understand divine things. Flesh gives birth to flesh; only Spirit gives birth to Spirit. He has to give up one way of knowing to embrace a new one. He must give up one frame of reference to adopt the new one. He must leave home in order to find the home he's really looking for. “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

In order to see who Jesus is Nicodemus has to believe. Now, in our skeptical age, seeing is believing; seeing, we say, is required for belief, for understanding. Where's the evidence, we ask? That's one way of gaining knowledge; however it will only take you so far. There's also another way, the road less traveled that makes all the difference. “Believe in order to understand,” Augustine (354-430) wisely said, “because unless you believe, you will not understand.” Or as Anselm (1033-1109) said, “*Credo ut intelligam.*” “I believe in order to understand.” We believe in order to see. People of faith believe and believe and believe, in spite of the evidence, and then watch the evidence change.¹ And that belief – like trusting the voice of God and leaving Haran or believing that God could somehow be at work through the crucified Jesus (which is the reference to the Son of Man being lifted up) – requires a leave taking, a leaving home, giving up the familiar or the expected in order to embrace something new, in order to see – *truly see* – what human sight can never see on its own.

To believe in order to understand requires divine aid, we must be born again. Being born again is not something that we do, it's not a formula, neither is it a label for a certain kind or subset of Christian. Every believer in some sense must be born again, or more accurately, “born from above,” meaning a new orientation provided by God's life pouring through us. This phrase is really a description of what it looks and feels like when we believe and begin to see the world and ourselves and others and even God from *God's* perspective. Being born again is the process

¹ Quotation attributed to Jim Wallis of Sojourners, but I don't believe it was original to him.

of reorientation whereby one comes to believe in a completely new way. It's like starting all over again and learning all over again, like a child. When you realize everything you thought you knew about yourself and how the world works and even God might be wrong, and you yield to the Spirit of Christ who wants to show you who you really are and what the world is like and the unfathomable love of God.

Both of these texts express the *movement of faith*, of the journey required to go from one place to another, of leaving something behind in order to find what we're really looking for. They speak of dying and rising, of giving up in order to take up. Both texts are giving voice to the inevitable change we experience when we make that journey toward God, or step out in the night toward Jesus, or pray and follow like a disciple.

Jesus calls this change being "born again" or "born from above," which is really, if you think about it, a kind of *home-coming*. There's no going home without it. There's no way of getting there on our own, we can't map our way there, we can't reason or think our way there; we need help from above. Our minds and hearts need to change in order for us to recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of God's promises and hope for the future. *Otherwise Jesus' death on the cross is just one out of thousands, possibly millions of those who died at the hands of the Romans, instead of being the person through whom and in whom God was and is at work to transform the world and make all things new, whose reach on the cross fulfills the promise made to Abram long ago of God's blessings given to the entire world.* There's no way of getting home without this change of perspective.

Without it we can't see the way home and home is this, *home is this*: "For God so love 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."

The Christian life is a journey toward home and everyone here is at a different stage on the way.² The Christian life is never static. We should not be standing still. We need to be moving forward. All of us are on this journey home – not to heaven (although it's included), but the journey toward fully fathoming the love of God that pours through the life of Christ, a love that never condemns but seeks to save, a love that really changes us and changes the world. It's not surprising that the earliest followers of Jesus were known not as Christians, but as *The Way*. We too are people of the Way, on the Way. And for believers then and now, *Jesus* is still the road home.

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² Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "Still round the corner there may wait, / A new road or a secret gate." J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973).