

Go from Your Country

COMMUNION

March 5, 2023

Genesis 12:1-4a

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ 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.” ⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² 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.” ³ 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?”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ 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.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus 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. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that 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. ¹⁷ “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.



As we come to our second Sunday of our Lenten journey, we continue with the themes of movement and destination. Our primary characters today are Abram and Nicodemus.

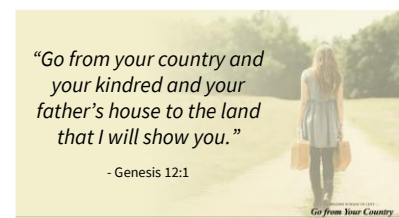
God asks Abram to move to an unknown destination, to a place that God will reveal. God asks Nicodemus to move to an unknown destination too, to a place of new faith. We will also travel a bit with a woman who moves through the crowd, seeking to touch the one who offers her the healing that she has sought for 12 long years. Her travels to doctor after doctor, to priest after priest, have left her without any more resources, with almost no hope. As we prepare to walk with these three and with one another, let us pray...

As we begin, I invite you to turn with me to Genesis 12. As we dive into this passage, let us step back in time a little while. We do so because there is great value in understanding the context of Abram’s call and the connections to the story of Israel.

After the flood, Noah and his three sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth – began to raise families. As their families grew, they began to spread outward from Canaan, which was located where present-day Israel sits. On the map you can see the directions that each son and his descendants spread. Canaan is right in the confluence of these three larger circles. Terah was Abram's father. He was descendent of Shem. Terah and his family were living in Ur of the Chaldeans when Abram was born. Ur was in the far eastern lands originally settled by Shem and his descendants. Ur is located by the Persian Gulf. After Abram married Sarai, Terah decided to move the family to Canaan, back to their ancestral homeland. Abram and Sarai would have been young – likely in their early teens. But they never got there. The clan made it as far as Haran. Haran sits along the Tigris River, part way to Canaan, in the overlapping area between Shem and Japheth. Terah and family lived in Haran for around 60 years, until Abram was about 75 years old.



In the opening verse of our passage from Genesis 12, right after Terah died, Abram receives God's direction: *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."* Now the patriarch himself, Abram decides to fulfill his calling. It was time to complete the journey that his father had begun long ago.



Maybe you, like me, can relate to Terah or maybe to Abram. Terah had set off for Canaan. His dream was to return “home.” Perhaps you’ve had such a dream – a desire to return to your roots. You made a decision and you set out. But then life happened, and you ended up settling – not in Haran but wherever you got to. You didn’t fulfill the dream, but where you stopped was good and that became home. You could even recall the dream for a while, each morning when you got up and readied yourself to face the day. Over time, though, the details slipped away.

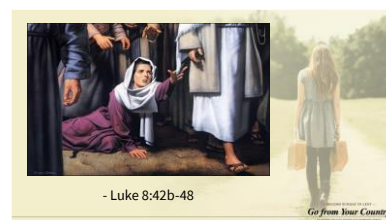
Abram had been a part of Terah’s dream long ago too. He was part of the trip towards Canaan from the get-go. But up to this point, it was his dad’s adventure. Terah was the patriarch. So Abram made a home in Haran too. Now the situation changes, Abram hears these words of God. For me, I’d struggle with the last part of the call – those last 8 words: *“to the land that I will show you.”* As a pastor in the United Methodist Church, I understand that my phone could ring anytime now, in what is called “appointment season,” and I could see that Dan Bader is calling. The DS would leave a message and I’d have to call him back at some point. I’ve been moved twice so far in my 12+ years of ministry. Knowing that I was moving to Winner or to Piedmont, though, is about a million miles from God speaking and saying, “Pack up your house, I’m sending you somewhere.” My friends, that is basically what God said to Abram. Load everything up, get on the road, and I’ll show you where to go. How many of you would be loading up the U-Haul?

There is no printed Google map; there is no cell phone with a GPS. How could there be – he did not know where he was going.

But there is a promise of great blessing, a promise to make of his descendants a great nation, a promise to be a blessing. To me, that nice and all, but, God, where are we going? That would be my question.

There is no internal debate that we get to read about. There is no back and forth between God and Abram. In verse 4 we simply read, “*So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.*” That’s it. All we have is Abram’s action: he went. He believed in God’s direction, and he went as the Lord told him to go. Like with Abram, God doesn’t want us to wait until we are certain. God doesn’t want us to sit down and first print out a Google map. When we hear the call, when we feel the nudge, God isn’t looking for us to come up with a list of questions or a list of excuses. I believe that like it was with Abram, when we do simply go, we too will find a blessing along the way. In fact, once we take that first step, we receive a blessing. It is the blessing of being obedient, of choosing to live as a disciple.

Turn with me to Luke 8 as we pick up a reading from our 40-day Luke readings. Here we find a woman who went where she felt led to go. She was not sure what would happen



when she got “there.” But she felt the call upon her soul; she felt the nudge to go to Jesus. This woman had been hemorrhaging blood for 12 years. She had spent everything she had and remained without a cure. This woman falls into the crowd and she works her way up to get just behind Jesus. Finding herself home, she reaches out and touches the fringe of his clothes.

In verse 44 we learn, “*immediately her hemorrhage stopped.*” Immediately. This scene raises two questions for me. First, what led her on this journey? Second, why was she healed?

First, what led her. We could assume that she has heard of Jesus. We could assume that she knows that he has healed other people. We could assume that she was a woman of faith – Jewish probably, but still a woman of faith. She was healed because she believed that Jesus could heal her. As we press on in the passage, we see that she is healed and that Jesus notices. He stops right then and there and asks, “*Who touched me?*” The disciples cue us in to the absurdity of this question for everyone except Jesus and the woman. The disciples tell Jesus that lots of people are pressing in on him. No one steps up to confess. Then Jesus tells them that he noticed power going out from him.

Because of this and because of Jesus’ insistence, the woman sees that she has to come forward. Doing so she shares why she touched him and she professes to what happened – “*she had been immediately healed.*” Jesus tells her that her faith has healed her, and he blesses her, telling her to go in peace. Just as with Abram, simply going brings a blessing. Being willing to take that step of faith brings her healing. Her healing came through her obedience, through trusting in the power of Jesus to change her life. Because she was willing to step forward in faith, because she chose to trust in Jesus, she was healed and was able to leave behind the medical condition that had become “home” for her for so many long years. What a blessing she received.

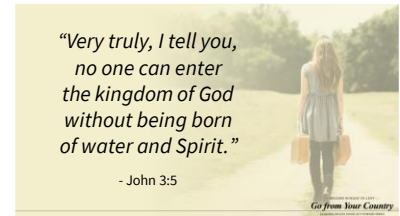


Please turn with me to John 3 where we see another example of one going from his own country, just in a different way. In John 3 we meet Nicodemus, another who senses that Jesus could change his life. Like the woman with the hemorrhaging, Nicodemus would certainly be familiar with Jesus. Nicodemus was a leader of the people, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin.

By this point many of his peers had clashed with Jesus. And been humbled again and again by Jesus. The stories of Jesus' teachings and the rumors of the healings are buzzing around Jerusalem and the countryside. Nicodemus is a man of power and status. To associate with this backwater, country preacher in any way other than to verbally spar with him – that was simply unthinkable for a man like Nicodemus. It would've gotten him kicked out of the Pharisee group and banned from the Sanhedrin, for sure. This is why Nicodemus goes to Jesus at night. Under the cover of dark, Nicodemus wants to have a conversation with Jesus.

The conversation begins with some niceties – *“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.”* This is maybe a polite beginning – greasing the wheels, so to speak. But Jesus immediately changes gears and puts Nicodemus on the defensive. He tells Nicodemus that he must be *“born from above”* to see the kingdom of God. He says, ‘Nicodemus, you must become a new person to be a part of what God is doing, to be a part of what God has in store.’ This totally dumbfounds Nicodemus. He spends the rest of the conversation trying to catch up.

Being “*born from above*” is a reference to becoming a new person, being born of God. Continuing, Jesus says, “*Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.*” There is a change in us when we are born of the Spirit. Being born from the womb, from the water, we are born “from below.” As such, we are earthly creatures. We focus on the things of the world.



Being of this world, we put our nose to the grindstone, we find meaning in our successes and failures. For Nicodemus, meaning comes from keeping the letter of the Law. Meaning comes from keeping oneself pure and by keeping a distance between yourself and the sinners and outcasts of this world. By being born of the Spirit, Jesus is inviting Nicodemus into a life that knows love, hope, joy, transformation, possibility. Being guided by the Spirit, that led Abram to leave Haran. Being guided by the Spirit, that led the woman through the crowd and to the fringe on Jesus’ clothing.

‘Being born of the water’ also refers to baptism. That was often seen as the first step. As John the Baptist invited people into the water he was calling them to repentance as a means to prepare themselves for the baptism of the Spirit. We recall that the Pharisees thought they had no need of repentance. They were keepers of the Law. They thought they were good. It is the same with us as it was with them. We first need to know of our need to change before we are willing to enter the transformation process. This was where Nicodemus was at. Something was drawing him to Jesus. He just didn’t yet know why.



Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to leave his own country too. It is not a literal moving, but a movement within himself.

Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to let go of the need to be in control – that’s what strictly following the Law and

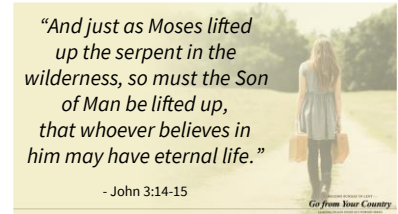
condemning all who do not is all about. He is inviting Nicodemus to see beyond himself and to begin to understand what faith is all about. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to not only know earthly love but to know and live unconditional love, to not just know hope for this life but hope for eternal life, to know not just joy around keeping the rules, but to experience true, unending joy living as a humble servant.

Jesus references the wind and the Spirit. Here he is encouraging Nicodemus to grab hold of the Spirit and to let the Spirit blow him where it may. Jesus is inviting him to be blown from this world to the next, from one joy to the next, from one soul to the next. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to let go of his current setting, of his current understandings, and to grab hold of where God might be leading him or to lean into who God might be calling him to be. Even though he does not know it yet at this point, the process has begun. It is what led Nicodemus to come to Jesus this night.

The Spirit will continue to be at work in Nicodemus. In John 7, when the religious leaders are upset that the temple guards didn’t arrest Jesus, it is Nicodemus that speaks up, asking about due process. It didn’t go very far, but at least he stood up for Jesus a little bit. His peers accuse him of being from Galilee too. This slight quiets Nicodemus. And then, at the end of the gospel of John, it is Nicodemus who goes with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus’ body off the cross and to lay it in the tomb.

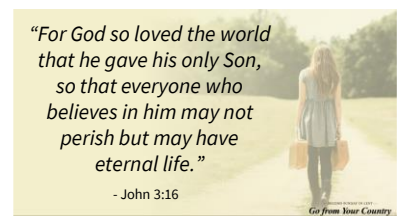
Both of these Pharisees come at night and wrap the body of Jesus in spices, properly caring for the body of the one who was even then calling them to discipleship.

As we return to the passage, we turn to the last few verses. Connecting into Nicodemus' understanding of Jewish history, Jesus states in verses 14-15, *"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."* In Numbers 21, after the people had grumbled against God and against Moses, God sent poisonous snakes among the people as a punishment.



To heal them after being bitten, Moses had the people fashion a golden snake on a pole that he would hold up in camp. If bitten, the people looked upon it and they would be saved. Jesus parallels this experience with looking to him after he is lifted up. Except instead of receiving worldly life, one would receive eternal life. Imagine how these words would ring in Nicodemus' heart when he heard of the empty tomb, and again when he heard that Jesus had risen!

We close with two verses – one we know by rote if not by heart. First, verse 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."* The call here is to believe in Jesus, to be all-in, to surrender one's life to follow and live out Jesus' words and example. For Nicodemus, this call would not have been totally radical. Jesus did not teach much that was new.



The Jewish faith called one to care for their neighbors, to offer aid to the orphan and widow, to provide for the stranger. The call to love God and to love neighbor was at the core of the Jewish faith. Jesus did not teach much that was new. He just demonstrated what it meant to fully live out the love of God in the world.

I think the next verse is what would really rock Nicodemus' world: *"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be*

"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."

- John 3:17

saved through him." Keeping the Law and condemning those that did not – Nicodemus was good at that. This was his world. But the mission of saving the world – that meant truly engaging and walking alongside those who were not like him. Here is where the rubber met the road for Nicodemus. I'd imagine it is where the rubber meets the road for most of us too. So here is where we return once again to the story of Abram.

Abram, like the woman with the bleeding problem, like Nicodemus, and like you and me, he felt the call to go. God spoke to him and invited him to go, to go where *"I will show you."* The Spirit speaks to us, to you and to me, inviting us to go where the Spirit will lead. The Spirit invites us to go from our country, to step outside of where we feel at home. That may mean going to a new place. It may mean responding to that call that you've been feeling on your heart. It may mean just going next door to check in on your neighbor.



Abram stepped out in faith, heading towards an unknown land, trusting that God would lead the way. The woman went and came up behind Jesus, trusting that a simple touch would bring healing to her body. She stepped out in faith, trusting that God would provide. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, sensing a call of the Spirit. As his story unfolds, he too steps out more and more, trusting in God more and more. My friends, may we too go where the Spirit leads, trusting in God even when it leads us out of our comfort zones. The message is simple: it is time to go. It is time to go forth, to go and live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As the Spirit has moved you in the past, how have you responded? How did this impact your faith? Or... how could have it if you responded?
- 2) *Pray*. Where or to whom might God be calling you? Spend some time in prayer seeking courage, strength, guidance, or whatever else you need from God.
- 3) *Study*. Read John 3:22-36. What words of humility do you hear in John the Baptists' voice? How does he witness to Jesus as the Messiah?