

## Fresh Start

A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011  
Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17; I Peter 2:9, 10

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

It seems that just about everybody we meet in these readings for today is starting out in darkness. 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." God says, "Go," and they go. At the age of seventy-five, says the story, Abram took Sarai his wife, his nephew Lot, and all their possessions and they headed for the land of Canaan." Just a few chapters later, we'll hear that "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. "Then the Lord said to Abram, 'Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be slaves there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.' I call this starting out in darkness with not a thing but *a promise* that ". . . 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."

You may remember that the Apostle Paul started out in darkness as he traveled the road to Damascus, papers in hand to hunt down, persecute and kill the people of "the Way" as the Christians are called in Acts when "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him." "Although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. . . And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank." I call this starting out in darkness with not a thing but *a promise* that "you will be told what you are to do."

Then on a cool, breezy, Palestinian night, Rabbi Nicodemus comes to Jesus, "a leader of the Judeans," we are told, "a teacher of Israel," presumably a well-educated, *enlightened* man. But this *enlightened* man comes to Jesus under cover of darkness, "by night," John says. Rabbis often studied the Torah late at night when it is dark and quiet, when there are fewer distractions. When it comes to Jesus, however, this teacher of Israel, this *enlightened* man, is really very much in the dark.

"I tell you the truth, Nicodemus, nobody can see the rule of God without again becoming a newborn, this time born from above, not of flesh and blood, but of water and the Spirit."

"But, how can I, a leader of Israel, an enlightened man, a husband and father, a pastor and teacher, again become a baby crawling back into my mother's womb?"

"No, Nicodemus, I did not say a '*born again* Christian,' I said a '*born from above* Christian.'"

Well, I call this starting out in darkness with nothing but a promise that ". . . God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

It seems that God is forever making a brand new beginning, from top to bottom, even and especially as we stumble in the night and grope in the darkness. Maybe Nicodemus thought that to start all over, from top to bottom, would just kill him, even as it would kill any of us to give up all that we have made of ourselves and all that we have gotten for ourselves.

This is essentially what the Accuser says to the LORD about the man Job, "You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And a little later in the story, "But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." And finally, this time from the mouth of Job's helpless wife, whose anger toward God gets directed at Job, "Curse God and die." I call this starting out in darkness with nothing but *the question and the protest*, "Why? . . . Why did I not die at birth?" Job wants to know, ". . . Why did you bring me out from the womb?"

Like Job, we cannot comprehend the disorder of the darkness, the chaos that breaks out upon creation, the human misery that touches every life. But sometimes the light can be so bright, when all things stand out with such clarity, that we are unable to see the really important things. We can be blinded by the light.

Architects tell how most older buildings are distinguished because they don't have enough light. "We have demanded more and more illumination, brighter buildings, more lights," one architect explained, "Just look at all the glass in downtown Chicago." He said, "In a way, that's a shame, because it is the shadows that make a building beautiful. Shadow, the interplay of light and dark, is a key element in architectural beauty."

Who has time for night? For shadow? Light, activity, work, business, 24/7 prevails upon us. Yet Scripture has over three hundred references to night. The book of Job speaks of "darkness" at least four dozen times. It is said that on Mount Sinai, Moses drew near to "the thick darkness where God was." In many places in the Bible, God is said to dwell in the mysterious, inapproachable "thick darkness." Maybe the Scriptures are suggesting that the glory of God is so great that only darkness allows us to approach because the naked light would devastate us.

There are some churches that are able to worship only in bright lights, happy days, with congregations singing nothing but bright, upbeat melodies. Some churches are just so happy, so full of praise and celebration, that they can cause you to feel guilty if you happen to come with a bit of shadow in your soul. But honestly, so much of the time we come with Abraham, Job, Paul, Mary, Nicodemus "by night," stumbling, astounded, groping our way in the darkness, wondering if there is anything more to this world than the dust and ashes of Wednesday a couple weeks ago. I think this is what makes our Wednesday Vespers services so inviting: the shadows of evening, the interplay of light and darkness, the softness of the night.

St. John of the Cross spoke of that "dark night of the soul," a dark night in which we are blinded by gracious light. St. Francis of Assisi, who had very poor eyesight, received his stigmata (the nail prints of Jesus in his hands and feet) when he saw a crucified Seraph descend from heaven, "sometime before dawn." And we remember that the ministry of Jesus was fulfilled, not on some beautiful spiritual mountaintop, but at a hill called "The Place of the Skull," a garbage dump outside of town, when the sky turned black for three hours. Yet, on that hill, at that dump, in that darkness we come face to face with God's deep love and mercy in Jesus.

We begin in darkness. Those ashes, smeared upon our heads just days ago, strangely point to our hope, our hope as frail folks who will one day lose everything to become as helpless as newborn babes. Jesus, too, is about to pass through the birth canal that stretches from the tomb of Lazarus to the womb of Easter morning; and, in the end, it will be Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who, again "by night," will be there as midwives to catch the body of Jesus from the cross and to bury it.

For now, we wait beside Nicodemus in the night until the end of this Lenten journey. We prepare to bury all our sins and shame right along with all our accomplishments and titles, our reputations and diplomas, our bank accounts and positions, and everything else on which we have staked our lives. For this is a God who is always ready to give us a new beginning, even and especially in the darkness, in the dark night of the soul.