

DIVINE “OBSTETRICS”
Sermon, March 8, 2020
The Second Sunday in Lent
Texts: Genesis 12:1-5; John 3:1-17

I like the story about a man who goes into a restaurant, orders the soup of the day, and motions the waiter back to his table. *“Taste the soup,”* says the man. *“Sir, is something wrong?”* asks the waiter, then adds, *“I can get you another bowl right away.”* *“Taste the soup,”* says the man. Waiter: *“Sir, is there something you want me to tell the chef?”* Man: *“Taste the soup.”* *“Fine,”* says the waiter, exasperated. *“I’ll taste it. Where’s the spoon?”* **“AHA!”** says the man. It’s a bit of a stretch, but *sometimes we have to do what’s being asked of us before we understand why it’s being required.* We have to be willing to “taste the soup” in order to discover the spoon is missing. In religious terms, that means *“Understanding often follows obedience.”* Psalm 111 observes *“all who follow [God’s] precepts have good understanding”—* not necessarily the other way around. We follow His precepts, and then we have good understanding. It is in obeying God, it is by directing our attention heavenward, that we begin to really understand.

Abraham certainly didn’t know how God was going to make him a great nation; he’s 75 years old, his wife is 65, and they have no children! When God said to Abram, *“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you, and you will be a blessing.”* Abram had no idea of how that “great nation” part could ever happen. However, our Old Testament lectionary text for this second Sunday in Lent is pretty straightforward; it tells us God said, *“Go!”* and Abram *went*. There is no mention of lingering, no mention of hesitation, no mention of bargaining, no mention of Abram’s questioning how this was all going to come about, no weighing other options. God said *“Go!”* and Abram *went* ... along with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all their people and possessions ... from Haran to Canaan, a distance of some six hundred miles. Abram’s faith was all about *doing* what God called him to do when God called him to do it so he could be a blessing to others! By the way, when God says to Abram, *“... and you will be a blessing to others,”* that might be taken as a promise AND it might be taken as an imperative ... as much as the divine imperative to *“Leave your country.”* In other words, *“Where I am sending you, do your best to be a blessing, not a burden, to others ... go out of your way to be a blessing to people.”* I believe God calls all His people to proactively go and be a blessing to others; and we best do that when we obey what God directs us to do even when we don’t fully understand why He directs as He does. As we obey God, our understanding grows and we wind up being a real blessing to others as well as to ourselves. Again, Abraham had no idea how God was going to make this work at the time, but he obeyed ... when we obey, then God’s Spirit causes all kinds of good things to happen. As you know, Abraham goes on to have a profound multi-generational and world-wide influence!

On occasion I wonder why and how the powers-that-be who prescribe the lectionary readings are selecting the passages; i.e., what is their reasoning, what the world is the common theme they see connecting these passages? I’m not sure I discerned the theme “they” may have had in mind to connect this account of Abram and the second lectionary text of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, but I think maybe this “Obey, then understand” theme is again expressed in John 3, but in a bit of a more subtle way.

In John 3 we have this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, the Pharisee. I’ve mentioned before when we’ve looked at this that the New Testament tends to be rather hard on the Pharisees, but not all of them. The Pharisees were not necessarily bad people; in fact, most of the Pharisees tried really hard to be good people; many were sincerely scrupulous and conscientious about trying to do what is right. Nicodemus is one Pharisee the New Testament portrays in a rather positive light. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin ... which means he was more than likely well educated and accomplished, he was probably highly ethical, and was probably held in high esteem by the common people who put him in that office. We’re told Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Unlike other Pharisees we read about in the Gospels, Nicodemus apparently has no interest in arguing with Jesus, no interest in debating politics, taxation, or matters of Sabbath observance. It seems Nicodemus just wants to talk to Jesus. The traditional reason people have speculated as to why he came to Jesus at night has been that perhaps Nicodemus was afraid of being seen with Jesus, as Jesus was making a lot of Pharisees angry ... but I don’t think so. In fact, we see later in this gospel that Nicodemus was not at all afraid to be associated with Jesus. In John 7, we find Nicodemus defending Jesus and confronting the other members of the Sanhedrin when they want to illegally arrest Jesus during the Feast of

Tabernacles, and in John 19 he joins Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for an honorable burial. No, I don't think Nicodemus was afraid to be seen with Jesus.

I've long thought Nicodemus went to Jesus at night for the same reason many of us go to Jesus at night. Like Nicodemus, we, too, are trying our best to be good. We, too, are really trying to consistently do the right thing. And at the end of the day, sometimes we lie there in bed fitfully tossing and turning with the discouraging realization that in spite of our very best efforts at being and doing good there are still difficulties we continue to encounter, and we have no idea what else we're supposed to do ... that's when we are ready to have a conversation with Jesus. *"Jesus, I'm tired. I'm no saint, but I do try to fulfill my responsibilities. But there's always more to be done. There's always something left undone. There's always something happening that isn't right. There always seems to be someone I've failed. There's always someone I've hurt or neglected. Jesus, I need help."* Yes, like Nicodemus, we know about nighttime conversations with Jesus.

Whenever we've looked at this passage I like to note how Nicodemus begins the conversation by sincerely complimenting Jesus. He respectfully addresses Jesus as Rabbi and as One who has obviously come from God. By the way, that's high praise when someone tells you it's obvious you've come from God; you must be doing something right! Giving compliments is just one of those things good people do! They make it a point to affirm what is good and right and praiseworthy in others. In so doing, they are affirming the standards they live by as well; they want to affirm and encourage the standards by which good people like them are striving to live.

Jesus replies to the compliment rather enigmatically, *"No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* As you can see in the footnote in our pew Bibles, the double meaning is both *"born from above"* and *"born again"*. This phrase (or, more correctly, this one Greek word) only appears in one place in all the Scripture, right here. So, it's good to look at the context to see which might be the better translation .. born from above, or born again. If you think of it, being born is a rather passive process for the one being born; the one being born has very little to do with it. I have three children, last month we celebrated the 23rd and 28th birthdays of my two daughters, and the 26th birthday of my "only-begotten" son is the day after Easter. I was present at all their births. None of them became born because they were responding to the obstetrician calling, *"Ye Must Be Born!"* They weren't coaxed and convinced into "making a decision" and then came forward out of the womb. None of them chose to be born 28, 26 or 23 years ago. No, birth was a gift of life they were given by someone who endured great sacrifice and a good deal of pain. And I think Jesus is telling Nicodemus this gift of the Spirit of God is also a gift of life we receive "from above," from outside and beyond us and our efforts, it's a gift, it's a grace, God's grace, birthed into us through this One who is about to endure great sacrifice and a good deal of pain to make this new life possible. It is all about grace, grace from above, a gift of God's grace conveyed by His Spirit and through His Son who indeed has the power to make all things new! It is about *"love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down,"* fixing in us His humble dwelling and growing in us until He finishes his new creation in us.

When we read this story, it looks at first sight as if Nicodemus took Jesus word in the second sense and with a somewhat crude literalism. *"How can anyone,"* he said, *"enter again into his mother's womb and be born a second time when he is already an old man?"* But now that I am somewhat of an old man myself, I think there may more to Nicodemus' reply than what we're reading here, and the older I get, the more I understand this. I don't think Nicodemus is engaging in some esoteric theological high-brow "religious speak;" I think he is intimating with a genuinely wistful yearning. *"Oh, how can one be born anew, how can one start over, get a fresh start, how can one as old and set in my ways as I am ever be born all over again?"* Maybe in his heart there was a longing; maybe he would just love to unwind the clock, to go back in time and decide things differently, do things differently, go back and re-develop good and healthy and loving habits, to re-begin relationships that had gone bad. To be born afresh. I think he is voicing the universal human dilemma of the person who really wants to change but just finds it next to impossible. However, as Abram found out earlier, with God, all things are possible!

There's much in this passage I didn't address due to time, and I'm sure Nicodemus doesn't grasp everything Jesus said in this encounter, but there's evidence he was willing to "taste the soup" ... he would obey what he could understand, and he would go on to experience the renewing grace of God by looking to this Son of God who is about to be lifted on a cross. It is in obeying God, by directing our attention heavenward, that we begin to understand and experience the "divine obstetrics" of how He brings about a new birth of life in our souls. Tradition tells us Nicodemus went on to be a first century Christian martyr; he is venerated as a saint by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. At the end of this encounter, Jesus said, *"For God so loved the world, Nicodemus, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world ... including you, Nicodemus ... through Him."*