

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday, in the First Sunday in Lent, we encountered our foundational story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. Within the Spirit's encouragement of us to face into this season of "repentance", or change, we started a journey together. A journey into considering how that story, coupled in time with the one of Jesus being led into the wilderness by that same Spirit, could...and maybe should...be interpreted by us in a different way.

Instead of setting the tone for all of humanity's relative worthlessness across all time, as much of the faith's theology rests on the idea of "original sin", we considered the movement out of the garden...as well as the time in the wilderness..as being a time of birth. Leaving the garden for new life. A time of birth, as in having the joy and excitement of limitless energy and possibilities before us...into the opportunity given by God for each of us to develop into that loving "other" that God desires. To be born into the manifestation of the very image of God...that God has always dreamed of.

If we still have some trouble getting our comfort zones wrapped around that understanding of the Garden of Eden and the Devil in the Wilderness stories, think about this as we move into this week's lessons. Why do we Christians traditionally think of the command from God to leave the Garden of Eden as a punishment, but otherwise accept God's command to Abram and Sarai to leave their home as a blessing? A pure blessing. In fact, some form of the word "bless" appears five times within the four verses of the Genesis reading for today.

We tend to imagine this passage in the very limited and literal set of circumstances within which Abram and Sarai found themselves. And, in doing so, we tend to set our **own** limitations and literal set of facts to the richness that God intends for this story's effect upon us.

From last week's looking at how our continuing life in the very image of God is essential to God's creation, what is the metaphorical significance to God telling Abram and Sarai to essentially "hit the road?" The preceding verses say that Sarai was barren, and today's set says, "Go to where I will show you and I will make you a great nation." But, instead of looking at this only as a miracle of biological fertility, could it have been that Sarai would have always been barren in the old land? Is it possible that to become fertile, she and Abram had to move into unfamiliar spaces? Is it possible that this is really a story about the promise of new spiritual, emotional, psychological life? That the birthing of a people may not be the physical result of the mating of one man and one woman, but resulting instead in..and from..far, far more?

And, how about Nicodemus?

Remember that in last Sunday's lessons, Jesus responded to the Spirit's urgings to challenge himself and his understanding of his own spirituality and ministry. To center himself spiritually within the reality of his humanity.

So, in the gospel lesson assigned for today, Jesus offers Nicodemus the opportunity to journey into his own wilderness. He is not faced with giving up a geographical home as Abram and Sarai do. But, instead he has to face into giving up all that he knows about the territory of his soul and spirit, by giving up his familiar inner environment.

As we travel together through this scripture, it is important to remember that the story was written into our holy texts not because it tells us something about Nicodemus, but because it tells us something about ourselves. The dialog between Nicodemus and Jesus is given to us as a mirror reflecting our own questions and, I suspect, our own resistance to giving up what is safe and familiar!

And I, for one, say, "Thank God for the story of Nicodemus!" On many different levels.

First, he comes to Jesus seeking answers. "Well, that is obvious", we say. But he opens by acknowledging that the Pharisees have been watching, and (quote) we know 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. (unquote). So what? Well, perhaps it tells us something more about the Pharisees. That they might actually have had an idea of what was going on spiritually in the ministry of Jesus among the people, but were too lazy and/or too complacent in their own comfort to follow the Spirit into their own journeys in the wilderness. That they were too "fat, dumb and happy" to follow the leading of the Spirit into a journey toward re-birth.

But Nicodemus takes that journey. He comes at it directly...quoted openly in scripture to ask Jesus. His central question is, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?", in response to Jesus declaring that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

What is this? All this back and forth about being born from the Spirit, from above?

Forget for a moment the direct dialogue we read and hear this morning. Forget for a moment the urge to limit this discussion to some crazy concepts about birth. What is this exchange?

Thank God again for Nicodemus. He does not give up. But, in full vulnerability before Jesus, and before all hearers of the gospels for all time thereafter, he follows his journey into the unknown. Into the unfamiliar space...to become fertile like Sarai. To follow the Spirit's leading into his own wilderness, all by trusting his innermost urging, his aching spiritual need to understand within the wonder of life itself.

Even though a "holy one of the people of Israel", he continues, "**How can these things be?**"

How indeed.

Jesus does not ease up, replying in essence, “Hey, teacher of Israel, you do not get it?”

Jesus says that one is born a second time. Not of flesh, but of water and *ruach* (breath, wind, Spirit). Christians know that the water of baptism signifies a new birth. But, it obviously is not a new physical birth in the body, but a new inward birth during which we accept a new name: “disciple.”

In the sacrament of baptism by water, we are participating in a visible, tangible metaphor of cleansing...washing away the old self, drowning sins, dissolving all the acts and behaviors that separate us from God and from God in our neighbor. We also practice what it means to die and be resurrected.

But being born of the Spirit can be something quite different. The word that Jesus uses with Nicodemus that means “wind” also means “the breath of God.”

And that, my dear friends, is the whole point.

Nicodemus....and each one of us..needs to understand that every time....every single time...we inhale; Everytime we take a breath, we take in the breath of God. We literally “in-spire.”

Go to your **own** wilderness and figure out in your own heart what that means.

Jesus tells Nicodemus...and us (thanks be to God for Nicodemus)...that the key to our being, our existing, is not the law in an of itself. Not the rules.

We...each of us...are here on this planet for one reason..and one reason only. To be in relationship with God. What Jesus tells Nicodemus is that this is not about dipping our toes in the water once and never thinking about it again. But rather about submitting to the actual reality of life itself. That will take over our whole being. That will permeate all the cells of our bodies, something that is so much a part of us that its presence makes us someone quite new. Not new once, nor even new once again, but new over and over and over, again and again and again, with every breath we take.

Our eternal life depends on whether we breathe in the pure breath of the Holy Spirit or live surrounded by an unhealthy and tainted spiritual or emotional atmosphere. It matters whether we “in-spire” the stale, used-up air of dusty, hurtful ideas...or the fresh, invigorating air that whipped open the doors and windows of that upper room where the first disciples were gathered. And it all matters because we are not in control of God’s breath or what God’s breath might empower us to do and to be.

Jesus asks Nicodemus: Why are you surprised? You cannot see the wind, but you have no doubt when the wind is at work: you see the grasses and leaves move, you hear the sound it makes. You cannot see the Spirit, it is true, but you can see the work of the Spirit. You do not see *ruach* in either form (Spirit or wind), but you see the results.

We see the results of that breath in the lives of others. In the same way, when we fill ourselves with God’s holy breath, others can see the Spirit in us.

The Spirit takes perfectly ordinary women, children, and men and gives them new lives filled with the power of God. And this is the exact shape of the transformation God offers us today.

Like Nicodemus, we are asked to “breathe out” our stale, old, self-defined selves and allow the Spirit of God to inspire us anew. We do not need to understand how it will happen or what the end product will be. We are the raw material from which God can create hands to work, hearts to love, and blessings for all creation. Is anything in our lives more important or more exciting?

Lent is just beginning; hidden within is the undiscovered image of God waiting for us.

Breathe deeply, my friends.

Breathe deeply as we walk into the wilderness within the company of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.