Springfield Presbyterian Church

March 5th, 2023

To Begin Again

1. Introduction

As I read these two texts in concert with one another, I see two

very different approaches to this idea of beginning again. Abraham and Sarah have an extensive story that cannot be summed up in four verses, but from what we read this morning – Abraham seems to follow the Word without question. God does present a beautiful sight – a future with this new land where he will be blessed and a great nation shall be borne from him. This is a wonderful promise and Abraham goes, simply put, because the Lord told him.

On some level, I look at the covenant God has made and thought – okay, on the surface, an easy choice for Abraham. But no – it’s not. Abraham, or Abram as he is called at this time, is going to leave everything he knows. He is going to leave his father’s house where he has been raised a particular way and will forfeit his cultural practices. He may have envisioned his life in a certain way and this proclamation from God is going to turn his own vision of the world upside down. Yes, the promise God makes is wonderful and somehow, Abram has this amazing faith where he simply goes – he simply believes and follows the path without questioning God. I wonder if we all wish we had a faith a bit like that.

1. Nicodemus

But, friends, to be honest, and I so wish I could take up Abram’s confidence – I’m way more of a Nicodemus. He’s in a tricky spot, because he sees that Jesus is doing acts that only a Savior can do, but Nicodemus is part of the Jewish leadership. Nicodemus is trying to lean in, but it is admittedly difficult. He is also so afraid of losing his credentials that he goes and finds Jesus in the middle of the night.

Jesus, who, just to be clear, I love very very much, makes this a bit more challenging by offering what feels like very abstract ideas. Jesus tells Nicodemus – you need to be born again by the water and Spirit. Sure – we understand that as baptism, as the renewal of faith, but Nicodemus is thinking in a very practical way. I almost hear Nicodemus saying, “I want to listen and learn from you, but I need you to help me understand.”

And then Jesus, again lovingly, gives him a hard time. If Nicodemus is a teacher, shouldn’t he understand these things? If Nicodemus is seeing these earthly things and he doesn’t understand, how can he begin to comprehend heavenly things? Jesus, and rightly so, has a high standard for teachers of the faith, so perhaps Jesus isn’t giving him a hard time, but trying to push him and challenge Nicodemus into thinking in a new way.

And then those words, the words that are written on billboards and bulletins and bumper stickers are said, the wise John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.” As we hear it today, I encourage you to imagine yourself standing there like Nicodemus was, before Jesus, not knowing the power of these words, but stumbling ahead seeking to understand. He didn’t know these words would be ones emblazoned on many a Christian’s heart many many centuries to come – but he was the first to hear these words and seek understanding. Whenever we read John 3:16, I think we need to read John 3:1-17 as we have this morning – because you need to know the context of the often quoted Scripture.

1. Beginning Again

Again, though, this morning, we sit with two examples. Abram

who begins again, seemingly unwaveringly, and faithfully steps into the future to a new land and place with a life he cannot begin to imagine. We have Nicodemus, who is on the cusp – trying to understand Jesus, who he knows to be holy, from a Jewish leadership point of view. Nicodemus is trying to dance in two worlds at the moment, one he knows very well and one he sees insight in, but doesn’t yet know how to express it. We will see in time that he does ‘get it’ – he will later tend to Jesus’ body after his death. But in this very moment, he’s somewhere in between the old life and the new.

1. Application

I wonder if you’re more like an Abram or more of a Nicodemus? Like I said, I’m more like Nicodemus – because I want to find a lovely way to live my life as I know it with the comforts that I desire, yet still point to a radical faith. I want my cake and I want to eat it too. I want to be changed, but not too too much, and I want to have all the benefits of being a Christ follower without the challenges or difficulties that it could bring.

The tricky part is part is that that idea just can’t be a reality. If I believe in God and seek to follow Christ – it means that I need to be reborn. Some traditions believe in this rebirth and renewal in very vibrant ways of rebaptism or an altar call. Yet, the rebirth that I’m thinking about this morning is one that is a bit more subtle, but still incredibly powerful. I need to be reborn each day. I need to die to the sin that keeps me hung up on negativity and points me nowhere good and live into a new sense of life – a life that will indeed still have sin because I’m human, but makes a conscious choice to seek to avoid it. I’m reborn when I look at the life of Jesus and seek to emulate it through acts of justice, kindness, and love. I’m reborn every morning – I take a new breath, somehow I am still here, and it is a gift and how I use my life to glorify God today requires me to live with intentionality.

It is hard, because we live in these two worlds – one that is secular and one that is sacred, but in reality…it’s all sacred. Somehow, in our beginning again, we need to find a way to meet those two worlds just like Nicodemus managed to in the end. It will be challenging, we might need to say difficult things, make hard choices, and listen to the Spirit who might call us to life in a new way that is totally unexpected. That’s the life you are signing up for and while faith demands much of us, we know that the reward is much more than we can even fathom here on earth.

As we live our lives together, this Lenten season and as we begin Spring, notice the symbols of new life and rebirth that you are seeing. It is the snowdrops or the daffodils and perhaps even a tulip in just a few weeks. Hear the laughter of children and remember the newness, the awe and wonder that is felt at what we, as adults, consider ordinary. Maybe it is in trying something new, and it can be as simple or complex as you wish, but something that indicates that because of Christ, because of this life, you have indeed been changed.

So, as we meet at the table, I would ask you to recommit yourselves to beginning again. Remember your baptism. Remember the meal that has been set out for all of us – each and everyone of us – because God so loved the world. As you take the bread and the cup, may it be a symbol of beginning again. As you later leave this building, may you step out of the building refreshed, renewed, restored, and recommitted, feeling different than when you first stepped in this sanctuary today. Amen.