

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
March 5, 2023
John 3:1-17
2nd Sunday of Lent

“Seeking-How Do We Begin Again?”

Our theme for Lent this year is “Seeking: Honest Questions for a Deeper Faith.” The scripture passages we’ll hear offer us many stories of Jesus encountering people who are seeking: today we heard Nicodemus’ story, who comes to Jesus in the dark of night; next week, you’ll hear the story of the Samaritan woman at a well, and the following week the story about the man born without sight. In these stories, each person is seeking a new beginning, a different life, a deeper faith. What unfolds is an exchange filled with questions and exploration. Often, an unveiling occurs—assumptions are disrupted, a new perspective is revealed, and mystery grows.

Like the characters in our Lenten scriptures, we are also seeking many things: clarity, connection, wonder, justice, or balance. We are seeking our calling, the sacred, and how to live as a disciple. Throughout the turbulence of the past few years, many of us are asking big questions about our lives and our faith. I hope this series will help us unpack some of those big questions in ways that are honest and faithful.

Today’s question is “How do we begin again?”

How do we begin again? Now in order to reflect on that question I want you to think about a time you were lost. Literally lost. How did that make you feel?

I hate being lost. When I’m lost I get really anxious – and when I’m anxious you just don’t want to be around me! On our trip to Maine a few years ago we got terribly lost after entering the wrong address into Terry’s GPS, and I didn’t like it one bit. All I wanted to do was get back on the right road pronto. “If we had a paper map we wouldn’t be lost!” I sniped to Terry. But who has a paper map anymore?! If I need to get anywhere I can enter the address into my phone and Siri even talks to me along the way and re-routes me if I miss my turn! I mean, just think about it. In this scientific and technological age, with information coming at

us in light speed, we have the answers to most everything at our finger tips. I mean, *we are rarely lost anymore.*

Literally lost, that is. Because we still get metaphorically lost. We lose our way in life, and have a hard time figuring out what's next. Or loss is forced upon us, and we don't know how to live without someone/thing. Or we anticipate loss, and do everything in our power to stop that loss from happening, but it happens anyway. Let's be real; our journey through life is never a straight one.

How do we begin again after our world is rocked by illness or death, or a job loss or big move? How do we begin again after a relationship has been fractured and needs mending, or when our outlook and worldview is altered and we can't go back to the way things once were?

How do we begin again?

Nicodemus, who we meet today, is a man who goes to Jesus in the dark of night, convinced he knows all there is to know and is on the right path, but after a conversation with Jesus is deeply unsettled and questioning how he will begin again.

Now, Nicodemus is alive and well in the 21st century. He lives in all of us who hold fast to a set of convictions about what is real and what is possible, and about what is not; he lives in all of us who believe there is an answer to every question, and who struggle when answers don't come; and he lives in all of us who must let go of expectations of how things ought to be and learn to deal with being lost for a while so we can begin again.

Nicodemus is us.

Nicodemus is a successful and self-confident man who is a leader in his religious community. He comes to Jesus at night, which is John's way of telling us that Nicodemus is blind to the truth. Except Nicodemus doesn't know that; Nicodemus thinks he has all the answers. "We know", he tells Jesus "that you are a teacher who comes from God." We know. Unfortunately, that's about all Nicodemus knows, because the rest of the conversation is a tortured, convoluted one that only highlights how much Nicodemus doesn't know. Nicodemus wants straight answers to what he perceives to be simple questions, but Jesus' answers

are anything but straight or simple, because a question like “How do I begin again” is anything but simple.

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” Jesus tells him.

Come again, Nicodemus asks?

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit,” Jesus repeats.

Say what, Nicodemus asks again?

And then Jesus, with the final volley, asks Nicodemus: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

We don’t hear Nicodemus’ reply, but we don’t need to because it’s clear he doesn’t understand Jesus. But is it any wonder? Nicodemus is the ultimate keeper of religious law. He knows how to scrupulously follow 613 laws to the letter; he’s an expert at it; but when it comes to the subtle nuances and uncertainty of faith, he’s lost; as lost as we were in Maine. Poor Nicodemus. He doesn’t understand that while Google may give us answers to objective questions, when it comes to subjective ones, there’s no googling that. You just need to figure it out as you go. And have faith. A lot of faith.

We have to have faith that for whatever reason, God is calling you off the straight and predictable path to a new one. And when that happens, you need to have faith that God knows where it leads even though you can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. Know what I mean? Nicodemus, for example, wasn’t at all clear on what Jesus was trying to tell him because it didn’t follow the nice and neat path he was used to. Nicodemus’ faith was very black and white. But now here comes Jesus with all this talk about being born again and he doesn’t have the foggiest idea what Jesus is talking about.

At a time like this, Nicodemus would do well to remember the forefather of his faith, Abraham, who headed out into an unknown future without the aid of Google Maps because God called to him to go.

And you know what? Abraham got lost along the way. He made a lot of blunders. And yet, the Bible calls him righteous. Why? Because he heard God’s call and

took the monumental risk of following that call even though it meant giving up every expectation he had of what his life was supposed to be like. He was righteous because he placed his entire future in God's hands, even when that meant he was certain to get lost along the way.

And that, my friends, is what being born again looks like. Being born again means we are open to God re-creating our lives. Being born again isn't the litmus test of faith so many people think it is; the "you better be born again or you'll be sorry" scare tactic. Being born again, or being born of the Spirit, means letting God work in your life, and allowing yourself to be open to the Spirit's movements, even when you don't know what the movements are for certain. It means giving up the expectation of how things ought to be and learning to live with how things are, even if it's not what you expected. It's learning the art of being lost and being OK with being lost.

Peter Gomes is helpful here when he writes: "What 'born again' means is literally to begin all over again, to be given a second chance. The one who is born again doesn't all of a sudden turn into a super Christian. To be born again is to enter afresh into the process of spiritual growth. It is to wipe the slate clean. It is to cancel your old mortgage and start again." (The Good Book, p. 188)

As someone else once said, "Being born again is not a threat. It's a promise and a gift. It comes to Abraham and creates for him a whole new life, just when he had settled in and concluded that the best part of his life was over. It comes to Nicodemus in the middle of the night, when he does something unconventional and risky and opens his heart and soul and life and future to something brand new."

Being born again can happen when, like Abraham, you take the enormous risk of following what you believe is God's call. Being born again can happen when you go looking for Jesus, even if it's late at night and you're feeling a little foolish. And sometimes it happens because God forces the issue and comes into your life with unexpected, life-giving love." (John Buchanan, "Love in Primetime", February 28, 1999)

That's how one is born again and it can be an incredible gift if you allow it to be.

For you see, in order to be born again, you must surrender expectations of how your life ought to be, and be ok with the possibility of a new beginning, the possibility that God has something new in mind for you.

In her book An Altar to the World, Barbara Brown Taylor writes of times in her life when she was lost and **God was calling her to a new beginning**. *“In my life (she writes), I have lost my way more times than I can count. I have set out to be married and ended up divorced. I have set out to be healthy and ended up sick. I have set out to live in New England and ended up in Georgia. When I was 30, I set out to be a parish priest, spending the rest of my life caring for souls in any congregation that would have me. Almost 30 years later, I teach school.*

While none of these displacements was pleasant at first, I would not give a single one of them back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path.”

Friends, sometimes God calls you to get off the path, and this is not a threat, a “you better do this or else” thing, this is God’s invitation to live your life fully and joyfully because God so loves the world and everything that is in it, which includes you and me.

God has something in mind for you, a new beginning, and sometimes to realize that, to claim it, to live it, you have to do something risky, something outrageous, something very brave, like selling the place and heading for the promised land, like Sarah and Abraham did, or coming to Jesus under the cover of the night, like Nicodemus did. It may simply mean saying “yes” to the voice that has been calling you, prodding your conscience, compelling your love; and it may mean saying yes to God’s love in Jesus Christ.

It may be true that we are rarely lost anymore, but as people of faith we can rest with the assurance that when we are, God’s not only got us covered but might have something wonderful in store for us-and that something can’t be found on with the aid of a GPS, it can only be found by being born again, by beginning again.

Amen.