

Lent 2 Year A,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

8th March, 2020

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 NIV / John 3:1-17 NRSV

Change is probably something most of us dread, at some level.

While it may bring something fresh, new and exciting,

it inevitably entails stepping away from the familiar and comfortable,

often into the strange and disconcerting.

[Our human minds like to know what to expect.](#)

At the most primitive level, our brains are wired to avoid the unfamiliar,

and work very hard to arrange our reality

into comfortable categories and procedures that follow familiar patterns.

There is security in what is familiar.

We know what to expect and what is expected,

how to act and react, and what is coming next.

We understand the routine,

and the familiar is organized in a way that makes sense,

and makes sense of our world as we experience it.

Yet you've probably heard the expression

that the one constant you can count on is change; that and death and taxes.

But that does bring up an important point,

one that all of us here have experienced.

Whether we like it or not, change happens throughout our lives,

whether we choose to embrace it or not.

Last week we talked a lot about making choices.

Often, instead of choosing to accept change, we often try to resist it,

choosing instead to try to keep everything “the same as it has always been.”

We like our routines, the ways we know.

Yet in a world that has change as its constant,

we can be sure that it hasn't “always been that way.”

That's just our perception.

Generations before had a different perception of “how it's always been”

and generations to come

will have another sense of the familiar and routine.

And nowhere is this conflict of the familiar versus change felt more keenly

than in our journeys of faith.

Both our scriptures lessons this morning

are about the conceptions of tradition

and the change that challenges those traditional views.

In our passage from Romans, Paul addresses that age old perception

that is it through the birthright from Abraham,

and adherence to the law that followed,

that righteousness was obtained.

However, there was no law or tradition for Abraham to follow at the beginning.

How would he have followed the right path then?

Paul is challenging his congregation's notion of “how it's always been”

and reminding them that Abraham is the spiritual father of all nations,

not just Israel.

Without the law to follow,

it wasn't his obedience to scripture or his actions that made him righteous,

it was his faith in the providence of God.

It was his willingness to step out in faith and accept change,

without knowing where that change would take him.

In our second reading this morning we have Nicodemus,

who represents quite the contrast from Paul's depiction of Abraham.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, an important one.

He was part of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Temple.

He was a man of power.

Yet that doesn't imply he was a bad man by definition.

Often when we hear the word "Pharisee,"

our minds often automatically assign a negative connotation

to what is being talked about.

Certainly, there were Pharisees that were responsible for

or involved in the persecution of Jesus and the early church.

Paul himself played a role in the stoning of Stephen in Acts.

But the individual actions of some of the Pharisees

do not necessarily make a statement about the group as a whole.

Pharisees, by definition, were men who dedicated their lives

to studying and interpreting the Jewish scriptures,

seeking to discern the meaning of those scriptures,

and how to apply those laws to the daily lives
of those who followed that tradition.

They were esteemed rabbis who spent their lives in study and debate,
following the best scholarly traditions of the time.

As is the case with any group that finds themselves
in positions of power and influence,
some are corrupted by that authority.

But many truly sought knowledge and understanding,
and had respectable motives.

Some of these, including Nicodemus,

took an interest in Jesus and the message he was teaching.

It was something new, a different perspective.

They were itching to hear more, to engage in lively debate
and perhaps gain new insight.

So Nicodemus, as their representative,

comes to meet with this itinerant rabbi from Galilee,
to find out what his message was about.

But part of the allure was the edge of this new message.

It ran counter to the status quo, pushing the boundaries,
not just of Judaism, but of the empire under which it lived.

Nicodemus was part of that status quo, he was part of the structure
that depended on and supported maintaining that empire.

So he came in the dead of night, in the dark,

where nobody would see him and question his loyalties.

He came seeking information,

answers to the questions Jesus had been raising among the Pharisees.

Yet this exchange doesn't go as planned.

It didn't play out as a scholarly debate

about established doctrine and dogma.

From Nicodemus' perspective, it went south right from the beginning.

Jesus responds to his initial compliment by saying

that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Now those of you who are paying attention may have caught the fact

that what I just quoted is different

from the scripture we have printed in the bulletin and what I read earlier.

Language and translation in this particular passage

are important to consider when examining it.

The Greek word used here, *anōthen*,

can mean either "again or anew," or "from above."

It has certainly been interpreted and translated as "again"

most consistently over the centuries,

to the point that "born again"

has developed a charismatic significance and meaning all its own.

Nicodemus himself goes down this road.

He is perplexed because he completely missed the symbolism

and point of the metaphor.

He's thinking of crawling back into his mother's womb to be born again.

It seems ridiculous to him.

You're only born once, isn't that enough?

Besides, everyone grows up and grows old and dies, that's the way of things.

Jesus also says, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit."

Now, it might have helped Nicodemus if he'd said that first.

But still, what does that all mean?

Certainly one can draw allusions to baptism from the water imagery,

but I think Jesus might mean a bit more than that

if we look at what else he had to say.

He talks about the wind blowing wherever it pleases,

and how unpredictable that wind can be.

Said in connection with language about the Spirit and the water

recalls the imagery from creation in Genesis 1:2,

where "the spirit of God," a "wind from God"

spread "over the face of the waters"

and brought creation into being from the empty void of what was.

There's a sense of needing to go back to the beginning.

But Nicodemus just can't grasp how that could be done.

He can't change, or reform his way of understanding,

of looking at the world.

Even as "a teacher of Israel," he can't understand.

Like us, he sees things as now,
as part of a linear way of thinking and keeping track of time.

This is how things work, this is how "it's always been."

Like Luke in our first Star Wars video,
he can't see past the understanding of the here and now;
he can't think outside of his box.

Jesus is critical of him because he is a scholar of scripture,
yet fails to recognize that God is constantly working outside of the box,
turning the world upside down,
and reminding us that God's time, Kairos time,
is not Chronos, chronological time.

Jesus is telling him that God doesn't work the way the world works,
but he still doesn't understand.

It's like the people looking down in the wilderness in Exodus
and seeing only the troubles in front of them, biting each other like snakes.
It wasn't until they lifted up their eyes that they saw God's way,
that they didn't have to quarrel and fight and bite and sting one another.

So, too, must the Son of Humanity be lifted up, so we can see above ourselves,
above our understanding of the world and time and each other,
from the way it's always been and the way we've always done it.

Because when we look down, all we see is what is in front of us,
the limitations we know, and the death that awaits us all.

But when we look up, we see what God has in store for us,

the uncharted possibilities in this world and the next.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him will not perish
but have eternal life....

“Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world in order to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Jesus was about saving this world, not condemning it.

But if we can't step back from what has always been,
if we can't embrace the change that comes,
we've already condemned ourselves to just more of the same.

We're like the people in the wilderness refusing to listen to Moses
and getting bit and stung

because we can only see what we have always seen,
the way things have always been,
instead of lifting our vision to see what God wants for us,
to see where the Spirit is at work and trying to lead us to.

We need to reform our thinking. We need to go back to the beginning. Start all over.

To start over doesn't mean we go back fifty years
to remember how good things used to be.

That's what the people did in the wilderness with Moses.

It's what led to them being bit and stung.

It's not about trying to live in the past.

Instead, it's about reforming our thinking,

going back and seeing things in a new way.

Jesus knew Nicodemus was a good teacher, a smart one.

But Nicodemus was still working on linear thinking

and stuck on the notion that none of us can go back.

Instead, we must all go back and start over,

by being born of water and Spirit,

by recognizing that we need to go back

and start with God's intention for the world and for us in Genesis.

It's going back and finding that wild Spirit at work,

and embracing the change it always ushers in,

instead of seeking to maintain the same old ways

the Spirit has already passed by.

It's stepping outside our Chronos thinking, seeing only the way it's always been,

and daring to imagine what new ways it could be,

however fantastic those possibilities may be.

This morning, I pray we as individuals, and as Christ's assembled body,

can be swept up by that wind and become the change this world needs. Amen.