

A BELIEVER LIKE US
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Texts: Genesis 12:1-4a & John 3:1-17

Genesis 12:1-4a

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.

John 4:5-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he

said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

In the readings this week, we run into two people who both have some sort of encounter with God, some sort of brush with the divine, but they respond to it in very different ways. First, there's Abram. God tells him to leave home and go to a land God will show him, and he does exactly what he's told. He picks up and goes, no questions asked. Then there's Nicodemus. He's full of questions, and he comes to Jesus looking for answers,

and he's baffled by what he hears. He can't understand what Jesus is trying to say.

So Abram responds to God with perfect faithfulness, and Nicodemus responds to Jesus with total confusion. And if someone came along right now and asked me if I'm more like one or the other, I'd say I'm definitely more like Nicodemus. And I bet I'm not the only one. When it comes to God, I think most of us have more questions than answers, and finding our

way to belief doesn't just happen. It takes effort. We work at it our whole lives, and even then we still have days when we're as lost as ever.

So let's take a look at this portrait John gives us of a believer who's just like us—a believer who almost gets it, but not quite; a believer who's literally standing right in front of the truth but doesn't know what he's looking at. It's a very dynamic portrait. It's a portrait that changes as we go along and notice different elements of the story. It's a portrait that shifts back and forth between these two different sides of Nicodemus—the side of him that picks up on the fact that there's something special about Jesus, and the side of him that can't make the leap necessary to comprehend what it is; the side of him that's open to wonder and possibility, and the side of him that's closed off to anything outside of his conventional way of thinking; the side of him that longs for something just beyond his reach, and the side of him that throws up his hands in frustration.

Let's go through and see how John does it.

First he mentions that Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night, which might seem like a minor detail, but John frequently uses night to indicate someone who's not only literally, but also figuratively, "in the dark"—someone who's either unable or unwilling to elevate their thinking and see things from Jesus' perspective. For example, at one point later in the gospel, Jesus tells the disciples, "those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them" (11:10). And during the Last Supper, when Jesus reveals that Judas is the one who's going to betray him, John says that Judas "immediately went out. And it was night" (13:30).

So right away John is dropping a major hint that this is someone with limited vision, someone with spiritual blinders on. But then, in the very same sentence, he turns around and shows us the other side of Nicodemus—the side that's surprisingly open. "Rabbi," Nicodemus says, "we know that 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." He may be in the dark, but he can see a little bit of light coming from Jesus, and he's curious about it. He may not understand how or why, but he senses the power of God at work in Jesus, and he's drawn to it.

So now we're thinking maybe we didn't give this guy enough credit, maybe he's more insightful than we thought. But then, as the conversation continues, we shift back to the other side of Nicodemus, the side that's very narrow and rigid. Jesus tells him, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," and what he means is, God's reality is so different than our reality that in order to see things the way God sees things, we have to completely change our perspective. We have to transform how we think. We have to be born into a whole new understanding.

But that's not what Nicodemus hears.

The phrase Jesus uses, "born from above," can also be translated, "born again," and that's how Nicodemus takes it. He thinks Jesus is saying we have to go back inside our mothers' wombs and then pop out again, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense to him. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" he asks. "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" He can't get past the literal meaning of Jesus' words. He's looking at it like an engineering problem. He's hung up on the mechanics of how a grown person can fit inside their mother. And even after Jesus explains further, Nicodemus still doesn't understand. "How can these things be?" he says in exasperation.

At this point, it would be interesting to see how Abram would respond in the same situation. It would be interesting to see if he'd understand any better than Nicodemus. I'm not so sure he would. Abram is a model of faithfulness. He does exactly what God tells him to do, no questions asked. But faithfulness isn't the issue here. The issue is whether someone can let go of their ordinary ways of thinking and embrace a larger vision of life.

John leaves us with the impression that Nicodemus was never fully able to do that

because he never has an “a-ha” moment. The scales never fall from his eyes. The story ends, John moves on with the rest of the gospel, we don’t hear from Nicodemus again, and we’re left to assume that he went away from this encounter as much in the dark as ever.

That is, until we get almost to the end of the gospel.

After the crucifixion, when the soldiers take Jesus down from the cross, Nicodemus makes his only other appearance in John. He and a man named Joseph of Arimathea get permission from Pilate to take away Jesus’ body, and together they prepare it for burial. Listen to John tell the story:

“Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.”

So this is definitely the same Nicodemus, the one who first came to Jesus by night, only now it’s the middle of the day. Jesus is crucified at noon in John’s gospel, and even if he was on the cross for several hours, the sun would still be up when Nicodemus arrives. And look at all the spices he brings—a hundred pounds! That’s an extravagant amount. When Mary anointed Jesus before his death, she only used one pound of perfume. Nicodemus is going to a lot of trouble, and spending a small fortune, to honor Jesus and give him a burial fit for a king.

Clearly something has happened to him since the last time we saw him in today’s reading. We don’t know what exactly because his story is mostly untold. But whatever it was, it must have really changed him. He’s no longer in the dark—literally or figuratively. He’s no longer confused and questioning. He’s now a fully committed disciple, and he’s every bit as faithful as Abram.

He just needed a little bit of time to get there—like all of us. And that’s why the reading today is so important.

Nicodemus is a believer like us—a believer who has to work at it. And notice that Jesus never gives up on him. He never loses patience with him. He never judges him. He never sends him away. Instead he encourages Nicodemus. He gives him hope and a reason to keep trying. He tells him his whole purpose is to bring people to God, no matter what it takes. “For God so loved the world,” he says, “that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

It doesn’t matter how long it takes us to believe, it doesn’t matter how hard we have to work at, and it doesn’t if we still get lost sometimes. God loves us, and God’s always ready to welcome us home.

This is the word of the Lord.