

**Genesis 12:1-4**  
**John 3:1-17**

**“Two Roads in a Wood”**  
**First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL**  
**J. Shannon Webster**

**17 February 2008**  
**Lent 2**

The stories in the Bible give us all kinds of characters – heroes and outlaws, courageous women and curious children, comical fishermen and conniving politicians, all the wild panoply of human critters. So the characters in both our Old and New Testament texts today may seem a little tame – two old guys with decisions to make.

Abram, later to be called Abraham, is a stylized character. We read nothing of his inner mental process, when God says: “Go from your country and every thing and everybody you know, to a place I will show you.” “So Abram went,” says the text. (What the text doesn’t record is what Sarah said when she learned she had to pull together a yard sale.)

“I will make you a great nation, and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” The call to Abraham is the start of the Biblical process, really. He is an Old Testament hero second only to Moses (there are 65 references to him in Scripture). A vast amount of the world’s religious people trace themselves back to him – Jews, Christians, and Moslems – all Abrahamic peoples. Songwriter Steve Earl wrote: “I believe that one fine day all the children of Abraham will lay down their swords together in Jerusalem.”

All he had to do is go when God said “Go,” and that choice echoed down the centuries. Descendents would remember and say as a part of the liturgy: “A wandering Aramean was my father...”, and Paul would later say in Romans 4 that the life-giving promise Abram received from God was not earned by the choice, but was a free gift of faith, and Thomas Mann will write, “Blessing carries with it an idea which but ill describes men of his sort: men. That is, of roving spirit and uncomfortable mind, whose novel conception of the deity is destined to make its mark upon the future.” Abraham could’ve stayed put, but he made a choice, and all this happened. God and Abraham found each other at just the right time.

It is in the New Testament text that we get to see a choice being made by an old guy who has to struggle with it. Nicodemus is described as a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a teacher of Israel. He came by night to Jesus (some say because he was afraid, others point out that Rabbis had urged studying the Torah at night when there were fewer distractions.) He may be making a choice about this Jesus fellow, for he has very nearly a confession of faith: “Nobody could do what you do unless they come from God.” Jesus said, “Sure enough, you can’t see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

The Greek word is *anōthen*, which can mean “born from above” or “born again.” Every place else John uses the word it means born from above. But in this conversation, Nicodemus said, “How can a person be born again?” Jesus responded, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> Actually, no, that was Hamlet, though Jesus said something very like it: “I mean by water and the Spirit, don’t be astonished when I say born from above.” Nicodemus still didn’t get it, and they continued to talk past each other.

It surely seems to have been a complicated conversation, because it isn't over. There's a part of the church that insists on using Nicodemus' language instead of Jesus', and in such a way as to be judgmental and divisive!

Remember that *ruah* in Hebrew, and *pneuma* in Greek, both mean spirit, breath and wind. You're alive when you can still fog the mirror. And Jesus is talking about a new kind of life. Jesus said to a Pharisee, a lawyer: "Born from above, by water and the spirit – the wind blows where it will... God so loved the world as to give his only son that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into then world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

None of this was what Nicodemus would have expected to hear. In his teaching, he would tell that the kingdom of God was a reward for a life well lived. And he would have been sure God loved Israel, but *the world*? Jesus told him things he couldn't get his head around, at least not then. The last thing we hear him say in this conversation is, "How can this be?" That question had been spoken by others of the faithful before: Mary, Zechariah, Sarah the matriarch herself. How? He was left facing a decision about this Jesus.

When I think of choices, I sometimes think of Robert Frost's poem, part of which goes:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same...  
...Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>2</sup>

So which road for Nicodemus? We are not sure to this day. Scholars argue about it. It isn't as clear as "So Abram went." In the old westerns, the bad guy wore a black hat and the good guy a white hat, and you knew who the villains were. Nicodemus has something of a gray hat. At least we see some of his struggle. He is ambiguous, uncertain. And therefore maybe a little more like many of us.

On one hand he would later, in Chapter 7, argue at the Sanhedrin that they give Jesus a hearing. On the other hand, we never read that he became a witness himself for this truth. And yet, toward the end of John's Gospel, it is Nicodemus who comes with Joseph of Arimathea to claim Jesus' body and prepare it for burial. Had Nicodemus made his choice by then?

We don't know. And there is the question. We know what became of Abraham, who took the journey. But we don't know about Nicodemus.

Worse, I think maybe the church has trapped Nicodemus in his Pharisee state by joining him there. That is, we may have so misinterpreted John 3:16, and what Jesus wanted us to know about being born from above, that we have it more or less backwards.

For example: when the TV pans the crowd at a football game, and you see the guy holding up a sign that says John 3:16 (there always is one), a text we all know from Sunday School, what does your gut tell you he is saying to you? Are you really thinking that he has a wonderful story to share with you? Or are you hearing that you need to believe in Jesus like he does, so you won't go to hell? Most often the church has picked up on this part: "that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life", and taken that to mean this: God might love you, but here is the condition.

And of course, like good Pharisees, the condition is extrapolated – you have to believe about him the same *way* we do, or it doesn't count! So here's the list of things you need to believe. And we skip over this part: "For God so loved the *world*.." and "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the *world* might be saved through him."

I don't think many of you are here to find out how to keep from going to hell. Nor should you be. I suspect you come to listen and pray and be at table because life is hard. And that you come because it is less hard when we do it together. And because in a world stripped of wonder in this age, there has to be something that matters and means more than mere survival or comfort. I suspect you come because it is scary out there and the future is uncertain, and that we all sometimes feel lost and alone.

We can react to the future in fear, or in hope and trust. That pharisaic impulse, the need to control and calculate the Spirit, that is a fear reaction. That isn't trusting in an Ultimate God to care for the world, to care for you. Fear becomes the opposite of faith, the opponent of life. Trusting God with the future, with *your* future, leads to hope. "The wind blows where it will," said Jesus, "but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."

When he heard this, old Nicodemus said, "How can this be?" and so began, it seems to me, his own journey. Maybe even a more difficult journey than Abraham's – an interior journey. Can human beings be transformed? Can an old guy like Nicodemus catch wind in his sails? Why not? Craig Barnes once said in a sermon: "All the roads belong to God...the savior can use any road to bring us home."

So you can hear this Nicodemus/born from above story one more time, with maybe some new ears, here is how Rev. Thom Shuman told it:<sup>3</sup>

at the bar, where  
he's been nursing his wound  
after a long bored meeting,  
Nick pushes himself to his feet,

wandering over to  
the cigarette-scarred  
piano  
where Jesus is  
slowly plinking  
out  
“in the still of the night”

putting a dollar  
in the chipped glass,  
he begins to chat  
with the guy  
who can do wonders  
with just a few notes;

nodding slowly,  
listening carefully  
Jesus looks up  
and smiles:  
‘my man,  
you need a new dance partner!’  
nodding to the corner;

as Nick turns,  
he sees Spirit  
waiting with open arms

‘but Nick,’  
Jesus whispers,  
‘you gotta let her lead . . .’

as he swings into  
a bluesy  
‘i could have danced  
all night.’

---

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare Hamlet Act 1, scene 5, 159*

<sup>2</sup> *Frost, Robert “The Road Not Taken”*

<sup>3</sup> *Shuman, Thom “Piano Man”*