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St. James', Mt. Airy  
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Lent 2C  
Genesis 12:1-4a  
Psalm 121  
Romans 4:1-5, 3-17  
John 3:1-17

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

Today is a day when I wish we could all read and understand Biblical Greek, the original language of the Gospel of John, because our English translation just doesn't cut it.

Unless we read from an annotated Bible and pay attention to all the little footnotes, it forces us to see God in one dimension; it limits our understanding of the divine; and it limits our faithful response to God.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and religious leader of his day, is an example of just such limitation – though it was of his own making.

To give a bit of background, the two stories immediately preceding today's gospel are the miracle at the wedding of Cana and Jesus cleansing the Temple – stories centering on the **signs** pointing to Jesus' **identity**.

Today we pick up with Nicodemus, going by night to meet with Jesus in Jerusalem. Upon finding him exclaimed, *Rabbi, we know that you are teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*

Jesus responded, *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*

Jesus' teaching here does something new. He combines the traditional image of the kingdom of God with a new metaphor, "to be born" – and not only that, but to be "from above."

But the Greek word *anōthen* means both "from above" and "again." This double meaning only possible in Greek – there is no Hebrew or Aramaic word with a similar double meaning – let alone English.

And so to be born *anōthen* speaks both of a **time** of birth ("again") and the **place** from which this new birth is generated ("from above"). It is both **temporal** (horizontal) and **transcendent** (vertical).

When this passage is translated into English it is always **either** into 'from above' (like our translation today does) **or** 'again' (like other translations do) – which means the ambiguity is lost and a choice has been made for us.

What choice would you make? To be born from above? To be born again? Could you be both?

That very idea was not one that Nicodemus could grasp – and so he responded to Jesus at the most literal level.

*How can anyone be born after growing old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?*

I have empathy for Nicodemus here – I can see that he feels his encounter with Jesus is spinning in a direction he didn't intend.

He came to Jesus feeling assured of who Jesus was, with a certainty about what was possible. When faced with a loss of that perceived identity and certainty, instead of opening himself up to the possibility of change, he grasped for control.

It was his grasping, closed, fists that made him resistant to Jesus' teaching about being born **both again and from above**.

*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.'*

Again Jesus tried to lead Nicodemus into the full meaning of his words. To be born again **and** from above is to be born of water and Spirit. Entrance into the kingdom of God will require a double birth: a physical birth (one of water) and also a spiritual rebirth (one of the Spirit).

For us, like the early Christians, the imagery of baptism here is remarkable. But like baptism – being born “from above” and “again” is not a ‘once for all’ event. It is merely the seed of transformation.

*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.*

The Greek word for “wind,” *pneuma*, like *anōthen*, has two inherent meanings: it means both “wind” and “spirit.”

This word perfectly captures the essence of Jesus’ message – the wind/spirit blows where it wills; and while humans can perceive its presence, they cannot determine where it goes.

Jesus’ offer of new birth is like the wind/spirit – a mystery beyond human knowledge and control.

And Nicodemus said, *How can these things be?*

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How often has our own faith been a Nicodemus faith? Seeking God, but not willing to let go of our need for control. Stubbornly refusing to see the complexity of God, and instead wanting an easy answer, a simple faith.

It brings to mind that pithy sentiment ‘let go and let God.’ And yet, there is real truth in that.

That’s exactly what Abraham and Sarah did. In today’s reading from Genesis, God told them to **go** and they went. They followed where the Spirit blew them. And God said, *I will bless you...and... you will be a blessing to others.*

How many of us have Abraham and Sarah faith – a faith to go where God leads? The kind that leads us to abandon everything we know, and more importantly, our sense of our own control?

I suspect that we, all of us, have a bit of both Nicodemus and Abraham and Sarah faith in us. They are different facets of our faith – or more precisely, our faithfulness.

Because for all the many ways that the word faith is used, both for good and for ill, and including the many times I have spoken of faith today, the best way of defining faith that I have ever come across was not in some heavy theological tome I read in seminary, but in a book my son Zach's God-mamas' gave me when he was baptized.

Called *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*<sup>1</sup>, it defines faith this way:

Faith is a gift from God. It is neither a particular set of beliefs nor a well-developed cognitive understanding of all things spiritual. It is an act of grace in which God chooses to be in relationship with humanity.

You see, all the faith we need is already in us. It's not a matter of Abraham and Sarah having a stronger faith than Nicodemus. It is their **response** to God that differs.

The book goes on to define faithfulness in this way.

Faithfulness is a human response to God's gift of faith. It is a disposition that welcomes God's presence and seeks God's teaching. It is our attempt to let God's love permeate all of our senses and guide our thoughts and behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Author: Karen Marie Yust.

And it is also something more, I think – it is a willingness to go where the Spirit leads.

In this way, Nicodemus does fall short of Abraham and Sarah. Yes, he welcomed the presence of Jesus and yes, he did seek Jesus' teaching.

However it was in the follow through – the following of the Spirit – that he resisted.

He just couldn't let go.

How true is this of many of us? We come here and we seek – but are we really transformed? How do we resist the winds of the Spirit blowing in our lives?

For me, in this season of Lent, one way that I am attempting to be faithful is to let the love of God guide my thoughts and behavior as I reflect on how the Spirit is moving in my life.

To be honest about the times that I, like Nicodemus, let my need for control inhibit me from truly listening to the voice of God.

To step back from my resistance to change, and being blown off my course, and instead comprehend the reality that change is always happening – often quickly: from pain to joy; from rain to sun – and just as often slowly: the unfolding of a season; that which seems unbearable lessening in time.

My invitation to each of you as we deepen our Lenten journey together is to take a moment, or perhaps a few moments strung together, to reflect on how the winds of the Spirit are blowing in your life.

To embrace the faith that is in you and be thankful for the grace of God.

To pray for the faithfulness to go where God leads, and to let go of those things that keep you from living as faithfully as possible.

To really, just, let go and let God.

~ AMEN ~