

## Night Whispers

### *A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church*

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February 17, 2008 – Second Sunday in Lent

Scripture Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121;  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

We don't know what time of day or night God called to Abram.

The story is related in such a stark way. No frills. Not much explanation.

We can't really say we don't know who Abram is – after all, the verses prior to this one give a rather detailed genealogy of Abram. From the tower of Babel, where the people were divided by different languages, from Shem to Abram, we are given their names. While the peoples of the earth were “scattered abroad over the face of all the earth” this family lived pretty much in one region. Some of the names in the list are actually place in that region. And the movement from Ur of the Chaldeans (probably Mesopotamia) into Canaan may be part of population movements in the second millennium B.C.

This is the story of a tribal people, sketched against the background of a broken, divided humanity.

We do know that Abram's may have been chip off the old block, so to speak. His father was had lived seventy years when he became to father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran (unlike Abram's grandfather, who had his first son at twenty nine.)

And the old man was willing to travel: he uprooted the family from Ur and headed north to Haran. We are told he had plans of going on to Canaan, but, we can only assume, that because of Tehrah's death, the family settled in Haran.

The only real bit in these texts that helps put a little flesh on the bones of Abram is that he was the first born, and he had a wife, Sarai, and she was barren. Abram, we are told later, was seventy five years old when he received this call.

We aren't even given Abram's verbal response, if there was one, or whether he had any questions or any further dialogue with God at this point. Even if he had any questions about God. No, we are only given the call and told that Abram ‘went at the Holy One had told him; and Lot went with him.’”

I guess I would need a little more information.

I imagine a piece of paper divided in half, with ‘pro’ on one side and ‘con’ on the other. At the top, the question: ‘Whether or not to leave Haran?’

The con list is, of course, long.

And at the top are the things spelled out in the call itself: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house . . .”

He is asked to leave three very important things: his land, his extended family ties and the safety net that provides, and the house of his father. First borns don't leave, you see. The younger son can take off. Indeed, they often were forced to, in order to make their own

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way in the world. Because the first born would inherit everything from the father; in exchange for taking care of aging parents and any unmarried younger siblings. But Abram's father had died, and all his siblings were married.

"Not enough information" is on my list. God doesn't tell Abram where the final destination is. He has no idea where God is leading him. How do you pack for a journey like that? Do you need light weight summer things or heavy woolen winter clothing? Snow shoes and sled or tennis racket, surf board, and golf bag? Dressy things or casual? Which is why, I suppose, we are told later that they took everything they had amassed and all 'the persons they had gathered' (which, I guess means slaves.) All that to say that Abram was no dust bowl Okie down on his luck looking for a break. Things were good from Abram in Haran, in terms of material wealth.

The promise is painted in broad strokes, and grand language. No details at this point.

But there, on the 'pro' side:

Make of you a great nation (heirs)

Blessed by God

Make name great

Be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

He didn't know what that meant – how he was to be a blessed and a blessing, but there it was.

Abram is not promised that things will be better in that new place, that he will be better off in terms of material wealth.

But something tells me, Abram had already discovered that material wealth is not everything, as he and Sarai felt the emptiness of childlessness.

God did come and whisper to Abram during the dark night of his soul. God whispered to him of his deepest longing: and promised him offspring. He hears the promise of an heir, a son -- sunshine in the midst of his night.

God was doing a new thing. God was creating an alternative to the culture as Abram and Saraai knew it.

Abram was told to leave behind his land, his past, his roots, his security system . . . in other words, he was told to leave behind the way he had always done things. He was to leave behind his past. His failures, his mistakes, his limitations. His value system. All those things that keep one stuck.

He was being called away from tradition, away from unquestioned assumptions, in order to parent a new way of thinking, a new way to relate to the Holy One, and a new people.

He was called away from "But we've always done it this way" to new ways of doing things.

He was called from living in the past to living in the now with a hope for the future.

Change.

Oh, how we hate it. Which is why Abram is lifted up as an example of the faith. For faith requires change. Is all about change: transformation. To be a person of faith is to be a

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person open to change, to transformation, to being reformed . . . open to living in a new and different way.

We aren't even aware how much we hate change, how resistant we are to it. We don't know where it will take us, what it will mean. And so we cling to the past, even when we aren't happy with it. We keep wanting to return to the ways things had been.

Change takes us into uncharted territory—unfamiliar land.

That's why, of course, Abram took that leap of faith, the one that lands us smack dab into the middle of God knows where.

We don't like not knowing. We don't like admitting that we really don't control everything. But that's just the point, it seems, for Abram: God knew. And that was enough. Abram had tried to control his future. And he discovered that there were some things over which he had no control. He couldn't do a darn thing about the fact that he didn't have an heir. So, he let go of trying to control the future. He was able to do so because he trusted God. He came to understand that the future is in God's hands and he could trust in God.

He was willing to head off to God knows where.

God knew, and that was enough, because Abram knew he could trust God.

God was doing something new. He danced into his future with God in the lead.

Many, many years later, a couple of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah are engaged in another little drama. This time we are told that "Nicodemus, (a Pharisee) a leader of the Jews, came to Jesus by night ."

And Nicodemus articulates his belief about who Jesus is and Jesus being from God.

Nicodemus had recognized that God was doing a new thing. After all those years of speaking to the people through prophets and leaders, of trying to form and reform a people who would be willing to live the way God intended humankind to live; all those years of starts and stops and glimpses of what it could be like – Nicodemus saw in Jesus the incarnation of God's plan. Here was Jesus: one who 'got it.' One who lived in right relationship to God and therefore to others around him. One in whom love shown, and the wisdom that comes with love and justice.

God was doing a new thing.

And, I think, Nicodemus realized that he, too, could live as Jesus lived. That he was being called to live as Jesus did.

But there seems to have been something holding him back.

Perhaps it was fear.

Nothing closes us to transformation the way fear does. You just can't go to God knows where if you're afraid.

Jesus seems to have picked up on Nicodemus' resistance. And so he speaks to him of transformation. Of letting go of the world as he has known it, so he may be free to embrace the world as God envisions it. Jesus speaks of being born again.

And Nicodemus takes it literally.

He doesn't get it.

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He is stuck in an old world order.

According to Richard Rohr: those old world views come in three flavors, which we see reincarnated over and over:

- 1) political cultures based on the manipulation of power
- 2) economic cultures based on the manipulation of money
- 3) religious cultures based on the manipulation of some theory about God

God had something else in mind.

Nicodemus doesn't get it.

Jesus is more than a little surprised, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Because it has been there since the beginning: this vision of a different kind of world. A different kind of kingdom: God's reign.

The prophets spoke of it. Moses knew it. Abram glimpsed it. How could anyone who read about what God was doing with those he chose to be a blessing to the world, not get what that meant?

This is what Jesus taught and demonstrated in his life and work according to Richard Rohr:

"Jesus is teaching that right relationship is the ultimate and daily criterion (of the Reign of God). If a social order allows and encourages, and even mandates, good connectedness between people and creation, people and events, people and people, people and God, then you have a truly sacred culture: the Reign of God. The world as it would be if God were directly in charge would be a world of right relationship. It would not be a world without pain or mystery but simply a world where we would be in good contact with all things, where we would be connected and in communion. Conversely, the work of the Evil One is always to separate, divide and throw apart.

It is all about union and communion, it seems, which means it is also about forgiveness, letting go, service and lives of patience and simplicity. Who can doubt that this is the sum and substance of Jesus' teaching? He makes right relationship desirable, possible and the philosopher's stone by which everything else is to be weighed and judged."

Rohr is saying that Jesus was in relationship with the True Sacred. With God. Not an idea about God. Not false gods. But the True Sacred which is synonymous with the Reign of God. He says that the "True Sacred reveals that:

- 1) God is One and for all.
- 2) God is sovereign to any group ownership or personal manipulation.
- 3) God is available as free gift and not through sacrificing another.
- 4) God needs no victims and creates no victims.

This new plan of God's requires those who would live in it to leave the same things Abram left. "There are four principal areas of conventional wisdom that Jesus seems to either ignore, oppose, or even subvert: family, possessions, status and the very nature of sacrificial religion."

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It is marked by concern primarily for the outcast, the left out, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, rather than self interest.

It is a reign in which the poor come first.

It is to this new world that Jesus invited those earliest disciples and invites us even today.

It requires our being willing to go to God knows where.

Our willingness to let go of our old lives and be open to new life.

The invitation is offered to us over and over, and that is the focus of our Lenten journey: openness to God's call to us to live into the already but not yet Reign of God – to let the hope of that Reign live fully in us.

Joan Chittister, speaks of that invitation as it has been couched in the Rule of Benedict, when she said,

“Most important of all, perhaps, is the Prologue's insistence that this rule is not being written by a spiritual taskmaster who will bully us or beat us down in a counterfeit clam to growing us up but by someone who loves us and will, if we allow it, carry us along to fullness of life. It is an announcement of profound importance. No one grows simply by doing what someone else forces us to do. We begin to grow when we finally want to grow. All the rigid fathers and demanding mothers and disapproving teachers in the world cannot make up for our own decision to become what we can by doing what we must.

In [the] very first paragraph of the rule of Benedict is setting out the importance of not allowing ourselves to become our own guides, our own gods. Obedience, Benedict says – the willingness to listen for the voice of God in life—is what will wrench us out of the limitations of our own landscape. We are being called to something outside of ourselves, something greater than ourselves, something beyond ourselves. We will need someone to show us the way: the Christ, a loving spiritual model, this rule.”

God called Abram to move on, to begin, to grow and become a blessing.

God called Jesus to live in right relationship, and teach and preach God's kin-dom.

We, too, are called to this right relationship.

We, too, must let goods and kindreds go in order to journey to God knows where . . . .

like babes coming naked into this new world – open, ready to embrace it –

be it in the midst of the old –

come and journey in the name of the Holy One “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

There are those who think a sermon needs to be three points and a poem. Obviously, I am not among them. But Thom Shuman wrote a poem I want to share with you . . . .

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piano man  
at the bar, where  
he's been nursing his wounds  
    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'      (c) 2008 Thom M. Shuman

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Our dance partner awaits!

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