

Answering His Call

There are some things I'm sure of this morning. I'm sure that Spring is springing. I'm sure I'm getting older. I'm sure that the wind blew on Wednesday, that the sky was clear and blue on Thursday and that it snowed on Friday. I'm sure that change is inevitable even when I would like a lot of things to stay the same.

But I'm also sure that God never stops calling us to change, to be transformed after the image of Christ. Without change there can be no growth and without growth there can be no future. I'm sure that we have to change in order to live.

Betty Jane and I are planning to go with others from our church on the work trip to our Navajo mission field in New Mexico this June. Frankly that makes me nervous. I don't like to fly. I'm concerned about the sleeping arrangements. I'm worried about how my body is going to hold up under the stress. I'm not sure how well I will be able to relate to a people who are from a culture so very different from my own. But, then again, nothing ventured, nothing gained. If I want to grow in my faith as a Christian I need to stretch and be open to new challenges.

Our Scripture lessons for today say a lot about the need for change and growth. The passage from Genesis 12 concerns the call of Abram, later to be known as Abraham. Genesis 12:1 says, *"The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." Verse 4 adds: "Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran."*

Answering God's call could not have been an easy thing for Abram. At seventy-five, Abram had to leave his country, his relatives, his father's household and go to an unspecified location many miles away. He had to pack up all his possessions and make travel arrangements that would accommodate his wife, his nephew Lot, his servants, plus sheep and cattle. This was a major change in Abram's life.

But this change was not change for the sake of change. This was change for the sake of something good. Genesis 12:2-3 gives us God's promise: *"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

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What we see here is that although change is often scary and almost always inconvenient, change initiated by God it will always end in blessing. **Change is hard but when God is in the driver's seat it always brings blessing.**

In our reading from Romans 4, we learn of the lasting effects Abram's decision to embrace the changes obeying God's command brought into his life and into the lives of others. Romans 4:3 gives us a big one: *"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."* Abraham's obedience to God's call confirmed his belief in God and his belief gave him right standing with God.

Abraham's act of obedience to God serves as an example of what God wants of His people throughout all ages. It serves to mark the distinction between hollow religion on the one hand, and holy faith on the other hand. Hollow religion is man-centered. This is man deciding to seek God's approval by doing what he thinks God might like or require. So man makes sacrifices to appease what he thinks is an angry God. Man does good works because he thinks God may be moved by that.

This, however, is not what God wants. Paul says in Romans 4:13: *"It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith."*

Holy faith, as opposed to hollow religion, is God-centered rather than man-centered. Holy faith is hearing or sensing God's call and responding with obedience to that call. Holy faith presupposes a relationship with the living God in which God communicates His will and man responds to what God is saying. This God-centered faith turns the religious world upside down because now God is in charge. This faith is not ruled by priests, teachers of the law, or by religious tradition. This faith stems from the Holy Spirit moving among His people, bringing conviction to their hearts, and motivating and empowering actions that glorify God and bless others.

Moses was praised as the servant of God because he responded to and obeyed God's call that he heard from the burning bush on Mt. Horeb. David heard and obeyed God's call when he was alone in the wilderness, hiding from the mad king Saul. Mary and Joseph heard and

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obeyed God's call and gave us Christmas. All the apostles obeyed Jesus' invitation to come and follow Him. Paul heard and obeyed God's call on the road to Damascus. I would challenge you to read the book of Acts and see this same pattern repeated over and over again. God initiates the action and those who believe respond to and obey God's call. This is the way Christ builds His church and this is the way He will bring His kingdom to all the earth. All that is needed are faithful listeners who will hear and obey God's call, who will hear what God is asking them to do and put it into action no matter how inconvenient or scary that action may be.

When we turn our attention to the third chapter of John and Jesus' midnight counseling session with Nicodemus, we see the same contrast between hollow religion and holy faith. We also see God's call for change.

Nicodemus was well-versed in hollow religion. He was a Pharisee, which means he was a member of a religious party within Judaism that insisted on strict adherence to the religious law. In their zeal to keep the law of Moses and to help or coerce others into keeping that law, the Pharisees developed other laws as the first line of defense against breaking the main law. For example, they took it upon themselves to protect the law of the Sabbath by prescribing what specific things you could or could not do on the Sabbath. They said how far one could walk. They gave permission to rescue your cow on the Sabbath if it should fall into a ditch. They limited the practice of medicine to the six days between Sabbaths. Jesus poked some fun at this by reminding the people that the Pharisees showed more compassion on stranded cows than on sick people. The Pharisees were classic legalists.

So this is where Nicodemus was coming from; he was a Pharisee. But Nicodemus the Pharisee had a problem. While his fellow Pharisees were convinced that Jesus was a law-breaker and a threat to their protective control over the people, Nicodemus had his doubts. Nicodemus had heard valid testimony or perhaps had seen a miracle or more done by Jesus. Nicodemus had heard about what Jesus taught, or perhaps had heard a sermon for himself, and what he had heard impressed him. Nicodemus felt strangely and strongly drawn to Jesus. Nicodemus wanted to know who Jesus was and how He was able to say and do the wonderful things He did. Yet, Nicodemus didn't want to bring the wrath of his fellow Pharisees upon him by allowing them to

label him a “Jesus sympathizer.”

For this reason, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, under the protective canopy of darkness. He began his inquiry into the identity of Jesus, not with a question but with a statement. Nicodemus says in John 3:2, *“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”*

Now, I don’t think this statement was a confession of faith. Rather, I see it as a statement sort of “thrown out there,” as an invitation for Jesus to defend it or to explain it. But, as He so often does, Jesus refuses to take the bait. Jesus skips the small talk and goes to the heart of the matter. *“Nicodemus, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”*

Whatever Nicodemus was expecting, he wasn’t expecting this. Nicodemus was flabbergasted; say what? I’m a grown man, I certainly can’t re-enter my mother’s womb and be born again! What do you mean Jesus, “be born again?” What kind of mumbo jumbo are you selling any way?

Beginning at verse 5, Jesus gives answer to Nicodemus: *“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*

In other words, it’s not about keeping rules; it’s about being led and empowered by God’s Spirit. It’s God’s action within us that leads us to godly living that counts, not the external things we do thinking to please God.

A key verse that unlocks the secret that Jesus is now revealing is found in verses 17 and 18: *“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned. . . .”*

In Nicodemus’ world there was a lot of passing judgment on and

condemning others. His job as a Pharisee was to remind people of God’s laws and to make sure they followed them to the “T.” His job as a Pharisee was to identify lawbreakers and see to it that they were duly punished. As we can tell from the Pharisees’ treatment of Jesus, they practiced a religion more of condemnation than of grace. But Jesus didn’t come to condemn. **Jesus came as the champion of truth and grace. He came not to condemn people, but to save them.**

Furthermore, the key issue is not keeping laws but believing in Jesus. *“Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”*

The Holy Spirit, Who is God and comes from God testifies to us and in us about Jesus. And what Jesus is telling Nicodemus to do is to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to his heart. Nicodemus, you know what I have done and you have heard what I have said, now tell me: What is the Spirit of God telling you about me? Don’t go just by the law. Change your perspective. What are you going to do with what the Spirit is saying to your heart? Are you going to stick with your buddies that you know, or are you going to change allegiances and believe in me, follow me?

I’ve always found it suspicious that John doesn’t tell us here what Nicodemus decided to do. I think John leaves the question unanswered as a challenge to us, because—you see—it doesn’t matter how Nicodemus responded except, of course, to Nicodemus. The real question is where are we at. Are we trapped in some new version of the old Pharisaism, or are we allowing ourselves to be led by the Spirit to believe in and to follow Jesus Christ?

And, if anyone here today has been on the wrong path, here’s the good news: It’s not too late to change. As God called Abram, Moses, David, and all the apostles, so now through Jesus His Son God is calling us. He says, “Come and follow Me.” Our response to that invitation is all that matters. Are we believing in Him and demonstrating that faith by the way we live out our lives in this world? Each of us must answer that question for ourselves.

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Sermon for March 12, 2017

Answering His Call

**Genesis 12:1-4, Romans 4:1-5; 13-17,
John 3:1-17**

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