

“Seeking: How Do We Begin Again?”
Genesis 12:1-4 & John 3:1-8

How do we begin again when the promptings of God’s Spirit lead us away from the well-known path? This past week I have been inspired by these words of Alexei Navalny, “Listen, I’ve got something very obvious to tell you. You’re not allowed to give up. If they decide to kill me, it means that we are incredibly strong.” He knew that when he is killed by the Russian government, people may lose hope for the possibility of change, and so he wrote this powerful reminder. It is tempting to just settle into what we know and even to resist new possibilities because of the discomfort of change. Sometimes life is so overwhelming with its challenges and pain that we get stuck.

In our Bible stories for this week, we hear about two people who were being asked to begin again. Both were men of influence and a lot to lose by beginning again. They seemed to have it all, but something was still missing from their lives. The first one is Abraham. After he had life settled and everything in its place, he received a call to leave the security of home to pursue God’s vision for his life. Abraham lived in about the year 1750 BCE. He was from the city of Ur that was located on the banks of the Tigris-Euphrates River, south of present and ancient Baghdad. The city of Ur was part of a sophisticated civilization, much more sophisticated than we imagine. There are excellent archeological ruins from that section of the world in the Mari and Nuzi materials. We discover that the average size of a home in that ancient civilization was 13-14 rooms. That means their economy was rich and well developed, and therefore the houses were large with several rooms. Their education was well developed. The city of Ur, Abraham’s ancient hometown, appears to be as culturally sophisticated as ancient Egypt. So, when we hear about Abraham being called to the land of promise, we can think of it as a sacrifice for him to leave the land of his ancestors and the comfort and wealth of his culture. He didn’t need to flee any poverty or problems in order to find a new home. What he actually needed was to let go of his comforts and securities in order to learn to trust God more and to know God’s peace that passes all of our understandings.

Let’s listen to the story of Abraham’s call according to Genesis 12:1-4

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. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I 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.’⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

The second man is Nicodemus. He had a respectable position in the community. He was already recognized for his spiritual authority and wisdom. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He was a highly educated man who dedicated his life’s work to study and knowledge. Yet, in the Gospel of John, Nicodemus is presented as coming to Jesus at night because he represented the group which did not understand Jesus; the religious leaders of Israel who felt threatened by his message of reform, justice, and love.

Nicodemus was part of “the world” which the Gospel of John had previously described as “darkness.” He was a part of the dominating hierarchy of Israel that had made itself powerful at the expense of the peasants. Nicodemus had witnessed Jesus’ prophetic act of the cleansing of the temple and wanted to learn more about him. He went to talk to him at night. Nicodemus was struggling to understand the message of Jesus because it may have seemed too radical to him. He wanted to know how he could earn or find his way to the heart of God. He wanted to be good. That is what he was taught. But Jesus took the opportunity to challenge the mindset of needing to be good as if it is something we are not already.

Let’s listen to the story from John 3:1-8

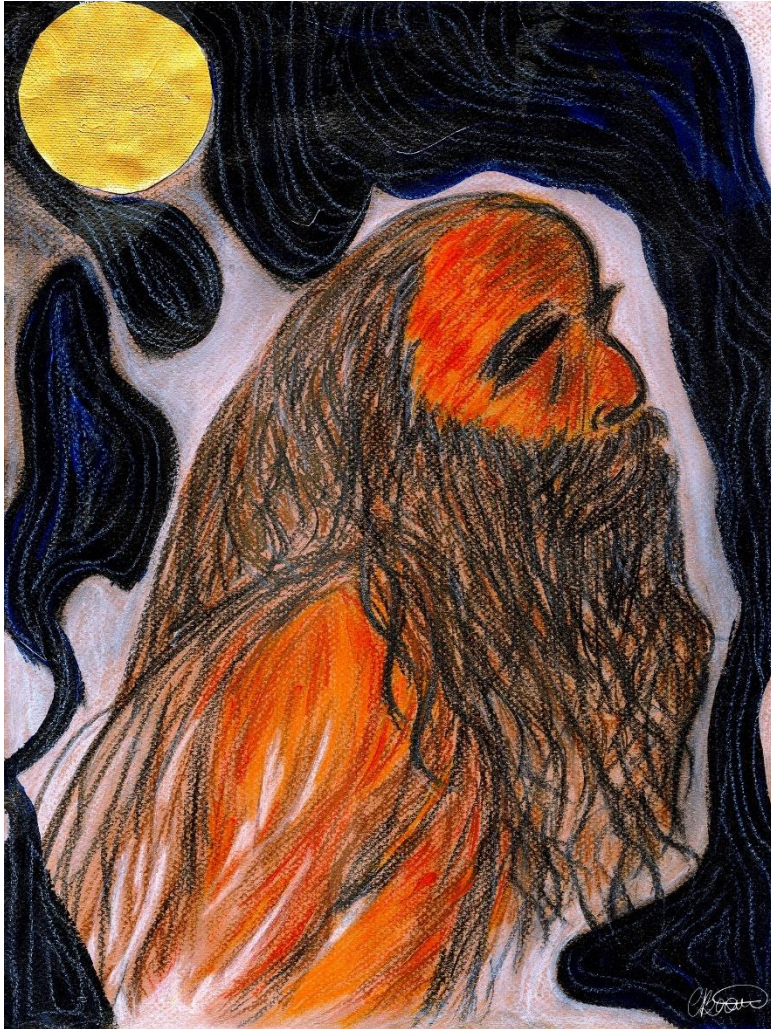
Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ 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?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ 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.”

Even though from the perspective of the world Nicodemus may have seemed to have all the wisdom that he needed, deep down Nicodemus was seeking something more. He knew within his heart that he needed to seek out the wisdom Jesus was sharing. Jesus challenged Nicodemus to begin again. To go back to his true identity as a child of God and to learn once more how to flow with the Spirit. The rigidity of religion and of the comfort we create for ourselves often gets in the way of our ability to live fully and from that deep place within us.

Both men were given a blessing and a challenge, and both followed the call to begin again because it rang true within their spirits.

In her book *An Altar to the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes of times in her life when she was lost and God was calling her to a new beginning. She writes, “In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count. I have set out to be married and ended up divorced. I have set out to be healthy and ended up sick. I have set out to live in New England and ended up in Georgia. When I was 30, I set out to be a parish priest, spending the rest of my life caring for souls in any congregation that would have me. Almost 30 years later, I teach school. While none of these displacements was pleasant at first, I would not give a single one of them back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path.”

Where do you feel a nudge in your life to begin again? What security, fear, discouragement, or comfort do you need to let go of? What might God be calling you to? I hope that you will take the time today to visit the Wonder Wall to consider where God is calling you.



In her artistic rendition of this story, Carmelle Beaugelin, writes this:

“I was raised in a Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church in Miami called “Renacimiento.” A simple translation of renacimiento to English means “rebirth” or “renaissance.” For my small Pentecostal church, renacimiento meant far more than the symbolism of being “born-again” Christians. It was a perpetual reminder that each time the saints gather to encounter Jesus, the Spirit calls us to continuous transformation, calling dead things into new life and Holy Spirit-filled revival.

It is no wonder that Nicodemus seeks Jesus in the cover and darkness of night. It is in the quiet of night that our deepest fears startle us awake, that our anxieties of the day keep us from sound rest, and that the fear of the death of our dreams and bodies looms.

As rapper Nas wrote in his debut album, *Illmatic*, “sleep is the cousin of death.” Yet Jesus challenges Nicodemus’ seeking in the night with a call to be born again, to *renacimiento*. Not just improvement, but transformation. Not simply resuscitation of what is and was, but a complete resurrection of what could and will be.

In this image, a metaphorically disrobed, aging, and vulnerable Nicodemus, surrounded by the milky gray swirls of water and spirit, wonders: How can this be? Haven’t I reached past my benchmarks? How is it that you are calling me to begin again?

We may see ourselves in Nicodemus today, holding the same questions in the sleeplessness of our darkest nights. Yet, what if we chose to hold fast to the faith that responds to our seeking? Jesus promises us that the winds and waters of the Spirit will lead us toward our own new beginning. Each of us will experience *renacimiento* if we dare to seek it.”

We will end with a poem prayer called “How Do We Begin Again?” by Sarah Speed:

Do we slide into something new?
Do we make a formal announcement? Dearest reader,
I have decided to begin again. Do we turn gradually, a gentle yield
in a new direction; or like a wave,
do we crash onto the shore of a new day?
Do we grieve the change? Are there breadcrumbs on the path?
Will Nicodemus be there?
Will it ever be easy?
I’m not sure exactly how we begin again,
but I know that moths wrap themselves in silk,
and after quite some time,
after many long nights,
after days spent alone,
they break out of their shell.
They pull themselves out under open sky,
and they spend the rest of their days chasing the light.
Maybe it’s always that way with beginnings.
Maybe it feels like the protective layer falling away.
Maybe we have to go it alone at first.
Maybe it feels like pulling and dragging yourself into something new.
Maybe there’s always open sky at the other end.