

Plunge Into The Promise
4th Sunday of Lent
Message for North East United Methodist Church
March 31, 2019
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John 3: 14-21 (NKJV) – *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”*

Have you ever driven on a really dark night?



Your headlights light up the road so many yards ahead, but outside that range of light...darkness.



You can only see so far up the road...you don't know what is around the bend or if a deer is standing in the middle of the road up ahead...you only know what is directly in front of

you...yet, most of us, with this limited vision, only seeing as far as our headlights will project, make it to our destination...we follow the light home...

That must have been what it felt like for Abraham. He couldn't see beyond a few steps...he couldn't see what was around the bend, across the desert, a few days down the road. He could only see his next steps.

Genesis 12:1-4 (NKJV) – *“Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.”*

The Lord didn't show Abram where he was going to lead him...God simply said, “GO” and I WILL show you...



Leave everything...family, friends, home, possessions...Put your trust in me...and God makes Abraham a promise...*“I will make you a great nation...I will bless you...I will make you a blessing to others...”*

Abraham had a choice to make. His decision was between setting out with his family and belongings to parts unknown or staying right where he was.



He had to decide between the security of what he already had and the uncertainty of traveling under God's direction. All Abraham had to go on was God's promise. He

could only see as far as God would show him...He had to trust that God knew what was beyond the reach of his sight...

Because Abraham believed and trusted God to light the way...to go before him where he couldn't see...he was made the "*father of many nations*" and we have been blessed through him...Paul writes, in **Romans 4:20-22 (The Message)**, "*He didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, sure that God would make good on what he had said. That's why it is said, 'Abraham was declared fit before God by trusting God to set him right.'*"

Abraham plunged into the promise...How often do we plunge into the promise that God has for us?



Or do we sit back, afraid to drive toward the darkness when we are only able to see a short distance ahead...more comfortable with the security of what we already have than the uncertainty of traveling under God's direction?

Throughout history, men and women have stepped into the light, trusting God to go before them, often risking their lives to follow God into the unknown. African American slaves risked everything to worship, to embrace Jesus, gathering together at night in defiance of their owners, not knowing if this was the night they would be discovered. Every day in countries like Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, Ethiopia, India, and throughout areas of Africa and Asia, men and women risk their lives to follow the light. The statistics are staggering. In 2018, 3,066 Christians were killed; 1,252 were abducted; 1,020 were raped or sexually harassed; and 793 churches were attacked. At the end of 2018, Britain commissioned an independent review into the persecution of Christians to find practical steps to support followers of a religion that it said has been subject to a dramatic rise in violence worldwide. Hate crimes and targeted violence against Christians in India during the first two months of 2019 showed a jump of 57 percent over the same period in 2018. We must be in prayer for those who are being persecuted around our world for professing faith in Jesus Christ; these are our brothers and sisters.

Every year men and women, like Abraham, follow the light into the unknown, not knowing where it will lead them, what dangers they will face, but knowing and trusting the One who is the light.

Two thousand years ago, another man was seeking the light...Nicodemus came by darkness of night to find Jesus...



We know that Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Nicodemus would have taken a pledge that he would spend his life observing every detail of the law. The law was the first five books of the Bible, the Torah...and the Pharisees believed that the law was complete and contained everything necessary for living a good life and pleasing God.

Nicodemus was also a ruler of the Jews...He was a member of the supreme court of the Jews, one of seventy who sat on what was called the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world. Nicodemus was a leader among his people; it is amazing that he would venture out to see the controversial carpenter from Nazareth...but Nicodemus had witnessed miracles...

John 3: 1-6 (NKJV) – *“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”*

Jesus tells Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Now at first it seems Nicodemus doesn’t understand...“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

William Barclay writes, “It is as if he said with infinite, wistful yearning: ‘You talk about being born anew; you talk about this radical, fundamental change which is so necessary. I know that it is necessary; but in my experience it is impossible. There is nothing I would like more; but you might as well tell me, a fully-grown man, to enter into my mother’s womb and be born all over again.’ It is not the desirability of this change that

Nicodemus questioned; that he knew only too well; it is the possibility. Nicodemus is up against the eternal problem, the problem of someone who wants to be changed and who cannot change himself.”

Nicodemus wanted to know...How?...How can I be born again?...How can I start over?...How can I change?...I have tried...I have dedicated my life to following God’s law...It is impossible...I might as well try to enter again into my mother’s womb...

Jesus continued...**John 3:7-9 (NKJV)** – ***“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”***

Jesus answers Nicodemus’ question...*“How is this possible?”*...by pointing out the wind... Jesus says that you may not understand how and why the wind blows, but you can see what it does. You may not understand the source of the wind but you can see the flattened fields, the bent over trees, the leaves blowing.

Nicodemus answers...still not understanding...*“How can these things be?”*...I still don’t understand how one can truly change...truly be re-born...

John 3:11 (NKJV) – ***“Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.”***

Jesus uses the wind to explain the Spirit of God...the Greek word used here for wind is “pneuma” which also translates “Spirit”...we don’t know how the Spirit of God works but you can see the effects of God’s Spirit all around you. He says, *“We speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen...”* We can point to many people who have been reborn by the power of the Spirit. You might not understand how the Spirit of God works...but you can see the effect of the Spirit in human lives.

There are a number of things in this world which we use every day without knowing how they work. Few of us understand how electricity, or television, or computers, or microwaves work, but we do not deny that they exist because of our failure to understand. Many of drive a car without any idea of what goes on inside the engine to make it run but our lack of understanding does not prevent us from enjoying the benefits of the automobile. We may not understand how the Spirit works but the effect of the Spirit on the lives of men and women is there for all to see. As Barclay writes, ***“The unanswerable argument for Christianity is the Christian life. No one can disregard a faith which is able to make bad people good.”***

Jesus makes it clear that faith...rebirth...being born again...the Kingdom of God...is a mystery...like the headlights of our cars...we can only see so far...what’s beyond the beams of our car’s headlights is a mystery...but if we keep following that path...keep driving with our limited vision...we will arrive at our destination. It is a mystery...but

there is evidence...so much evidence...in the changed lives of men and women just like us all around the world...

We can relate to Nicodemus... We too cry out, *“How can these things be?”* How can I truly change? How can I truly experience God in my life? How can I find eternity, peace, hope, love, comfort? How can I become the man or woman of God that I was created to be? Where is this light that will lead me through the darkness?

Jesus answers... **John 3:12-17 (NKJV)** – *“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”*

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”

The change in us has to come *“from above”*...*“The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life...”*

The question is not *“where is this light who will lead me through the darkness”* but *“WHO is this light...”*

Jesus is telling Nicodemus to simply believe...simply trust...look at the evidence around you...Jesus is telling Nicodemus to follow the Son through the darkness to new life...

Abraham didn't have it figured out...he simply went...he could only see what was right in front of him, but he had faith that the twists and turns in the road, the path ahead that was a mystery, God was there...God would guide him and bring him to his destination...a country that God would show him...so each day on his journey, he simply stepped into the light...

Like Abraham...we must plunge into the promise...journey forward on the next stretch of road that God and His Son are illuminating before us...leave the security of what we already have for the uncertainty and blessings that lie ahead, traveling under God's direction

The first step – *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above...”*...the first step is believing in God's Son, Jesus Christ...

How do we believe? We follow. Jesus said, *“Take up your cross and follow me.”* Obedience. Following the light...knowing *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...thou art with me...”*

Jesus explains that those who believe will come to the light and those who do not believe will move away from the light – **John 3: 18-21 (NKJV)** – *“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”*

H. Hulitt Gloer writes, *“The Son of Man does not just offer life; the Son of Man offers eternal life. But it is not enough to look at the Son of Man; one must believe in him. In John, “believe” is always an action verb. It is something you do...For John, the opposite of belief is not unbelief but disobedience. To believe, therefore, is to obey.”*

And remember...to obey does not mean to be perfect...Abraham was far from perfect...Twice he attempted to pass off his wife as his sister and he also agreed to try and hurry up the birth of his son by sleeping with his wife’s maidservant, Hagar. In all three of these cases, he showed a lack of trust in God to provide & keep His promise of an heir. Yet, God declared Abraham to be righteous...Because of his faith, because Abraham believed, when he fell he got back up, he repented and sought God’s forgiveness, and he once again set himself on the road, obediently following the light that went before him...

According to Jesus, those who believe *“do what is true,”* their deeds are *“done in God”* for they have come to and are following the light...to love darkness rather than light is disobedience...Gloer continues, *“The coming of Jesus results in a crisis that demands a decision. Neutrality is not a possibility. In love, God sent Jesus to save the world, but each person must decide whether to believe/obey and live in the light or disobey and continue to live in the darkness. Our decision about Jesus determines our eternal destiny. Not to decide is to decide!”*

Jesus tells Nicodemus...you must decide...



”And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so much the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Gloer then shares the following: *“Lent is the perfect time to consider our response to the crisis that Jesus precipitates, a perfect time to consider the nature of our obedience in*

*light of the images of Jesus' obedience. During his forty days in the wilderness he rejected Satan's temptations to be another kind of messiah. After the feeding of the multitude he rejected the people's efforts to "make him king." In the Garden he turned back his own desire to have it another way. Even on the cross he rejected the temptation to 'save' himself. Jesus 'became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.' If believing is more than giving mental assent to certain propositional statements – **if believing really means obedience – then during Lent, as we remember the obedience of Jesus, we must ask: 'Do we really believe?'**"*

Let us believe in the One who goes before us...Let us plunge forward with God, trusting God to light our way as we go...Let us strive to be obedient at each turn we find along the road...

"So Abram went, as the Lord told him"..."And because of Abraham's faith, God counted him as righteous." May the same be said about us...