

Seeking: How Do We Begin Again?

John 3:1-21 Genesis 12:1-4a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How do you and I, how do we as a community of faith, begin again? That is the question for our consideration this week, following our overall theme for this season of Lent, “*Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith*” from the resource, *A Sanctified Art*. Last Sunday, looking at the stories of Adam and Eve in the garden, and Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, we were asked: **Who do you listen to? In other words, what voices act as poison, and what voices act as medicine?**

Today, we turn again to two stories, another one from Genesis, and the other from the Gospel of John. These are meant to lead us into the exploration of how we can begin again. The resource material makes the connection this way.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the veil of night to ask him big faith questions. As [a Pharisee] a leader of Jewish law, Nicodemus holds beliefs that no longer align with the kin-dom of God Jesus embodies. Jesus invites him to begin again, to learn a new way of knowing and living out his faith.

In Genesis, God commands Abram and Sarai to leave everything—their home, their family, their land—to seek the land of Canaan and begin again. At 75 years old, Abram is called to start over, but through this new beginning, God creates a new family and a new nation.

Like Nicodemus, what are the questions we ask in the dark? Like Abram and Sarai, how do we follow God’s calling to begin again?

Let’s first look at Nicodemus. Perhaps a bit to our surprise, he becomes a role model for our own journey of faith, and especially for those of us who consider ourselves progressive Christians. That probably deserves some explanation, because I’m not calling us a bunch of pharisees. In fact, the exact opposite. Nicodemus is most often portrayed as either a coward, in coming to speak with Jesus under the cover of darkness, or as someone a bit slow, as in misunderstanding what it means to be “born from above” or “born anew” or even as some biblical translations state, “born again.” All of these, by the way, are legitimate translations of the intentionally ambiguous Greek word used by the gospel writer.

Here’s a different way to consider Nicodemus, who as a Jewish pharisee was obviously well-educated and an expert in the laws of Moses. **Nicodemus was a seeker.** In fact, we might call him the Patron Saint of Seekers. What is a seeker? A seeker is someone who wants to know more, and not just out of simple curiosity. **A seeker is someone not quite satisfied with the status quo or with the standard answer given to tough questions** – including those answers often given by traditional or evangelical Christianity. **A seeker’s mind is restless, looking behind and beneath for new discoveries,**

new ways of understanding, new ways of interpretation, whether they be intellectual or spiritual in nature.

A life of faith that focuses on seeking most likely describes you and I, and us together as College Hill. Many have defined the times we are living in as a time of spiritual seekers, more and more of whom are doing so outside traditional and institutional religious boundaries. Like Nicodemus, **many of us are on a pilgrimage of discovery.**

What is Jesus' response to seekers? You may have noticed that he recognizes and receives Nicodemus as someone on a pilgrimage and journey as a sincere spiritual seeker. **Jesus welcomes him and his searching mind.** That's one of the things that makes progressive Christianity not something new, but something that's been with us since the beginning. It's certainly part of what led to the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, with the split from Roman Catholicism. So on this level, this makes **Nicodemus** a progressive pharisee! Why? He **is willing to risk leaving behind the truth he has known from his own religious tradition in order to explore something new.** Jesus invites him into a new realm of thought and insight, a new perspective and way of understanding.

Jesus takes Nicodemus seriously even as he pushed him far beyond his comfort zone. Most likely, something similar has been the experience of many of you. Nicodemus deserves credit, therefore, for his questioning curiosity and the courage it took to seek out this new teacher and preacher that he's heard such good things about. And perhaps most importantly, and this is key, **Nicodemus had the necessary humility to be willing to hear and learn new things.** Jill Duffield, writing a commentary on this biblical passage in the *Presbyterian Outlook*, suggests the following.

I wonder if we need to take on the posture of Nicodemus this Lenten season. I wonder if we need to go from what we know in order to see the new thing that God will show.

It's no accident that the author of the Gospel of John sets the scene for the clandestine meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus under the cover of darkness. **Darkness, in this gospel, has deep theological meaning. The metaphor of darkness, used by the gospel writer, reveal the spiritual state of not yet understanding or accepting that Jesus represents the kin-dom of God in our midst.** Understanding and accepting that God is with us, as represented in and through the life and ministry of Jesus, defines the journey, in this gospel, from darkness into light. Because this language had led to some negative racial undertone, perhaps we might rephrase that as a **journey to enlightenment.**

This journey is reflected in the story by Nicodemus' misunderstanding that to be born anew isn't a physical thing, but a matter of being spiritually born again, or born from above, from God. From a practical standpoint, it's a new beginning. **To begin again is a spiritual experience available to all of us, but perhaps most needed by those in organized institutional religion who might think they do not need such a transformation of heart and mind (i.e. those who are so legalistic like the Pharisees and believe they have nothing more or new to learn – especially if it conflicts with their current beliefs, of which there is indeed fear to let go of).**

This seeking approach to a life of faith, however, is necessary in our own pilgrimage and journey to enlightenment. Many of us here today, for instance, have felt transformed in our personal journey of faith as we have looked beyond the traditional

ways of understanding scripture and ancient church doctrine and dogma. But **there is also more to beginning again than the opening of our minds and spiritual eyes.**

For this, I want to share the reflection from our resource material written by the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow. Bruce and I are friends, going back to when we both attended seminary together over 30 years ago now. Impressively, Bruce went on to serve as a Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA from 2008-2010. Here's the story he shares about beginning again.

In December of 2021, our family, four generations strong, remotely surrounded my grandmother through our screens and said our goodbyes. There she lay, prone on a hospital bed, her family bathing her with words of love, gratitude, and permission to let go. Soon after our call, she was removed from life support and succumbed to complications from COVID. In the days and weeks to follow, my heart ached and broke over and over again, not only for our family, but for so many others whose future had one more empty chair.

Not a year later, I too found myself lying prone in a hospital bed suffering from complications from COVID. While I was able to avoid being placed on a ventilator, for days I was unable to walk on my own or complete sentences of more than a few words. Fully vaxxed, a breakthrough case of COVID had my family again terrified that heartbreak and sorrow would soon make their mark and that the empty chair would be mine.

My grandmother, friends, colleagues, and thousands of others did not make it back home, but I did. **To this day, I give thanks for my life and hold dear the questions that it has forced upon me as I venture into a new life, a new beginning, and, in many ways, an experience of being born again.**

After my release, it became clear that long-COVID would have a grip on me for the long haul. With great trepidation, **I made the decision to leave the church I was serving.** During that discernment period, the battle in my mind raged. On one side, the voices of toxic productivity and misplaced martyrdom were causing me to doubt what I was feeling, and screaming at me to push through it. On the other side, persistent whispers reminded me that I need not progress to a physical or mental crisis before tending to my health, prodding me to choose to heal before my health made the choice for me. Contrary to so many cultural cues, I thought, **"I choose me today, so we may all have a better tomorrow."**

The beauty of holding the question about being born again—raised by Nicodemus side-by-side with the promise of a thriving future made to Abraham—speaks to my soul and what it means to start again. I made the choice to start over or to be born again, not out of the immediate urgency of a crisis, but out of a yearning for what could be.

I grieve the loss of the ministry that would never be for that particular calling, but I know that it was the right act for me and for the community if either of us is to thrive in the future.

As you think through these two narratives: being born again and being promised an expansive future, ask yourself, “Do I believe in the possibility of new beginnings?” And, when the opportunities are revealed before you, “Will I be willing to step into the promise of what may be?”

Today, I ask you to please ponder and reflect upon these questions as they apply to your own life – at any age. And let us together ponder these questions as they apply to the life and ministry of College Hill.

After the past disruptive, disorienting, and often traumatic three years of the pandemic, how do we begin again? I believe we have already begun and are making a good start. **Like Abram and Sarai, like Nicodemus, it takes courage, risk-taking, vulnerability, humility, and faithful trust that God is always with us on that journey and pilgrimage into something new.**

That's how you and I, how we, begin again.

Amen.

Resources:

“Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith”, A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide, 2023.

“2nd Sunday in Lent – Looking into the lectionary with Jill Duffield,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, 2017.

Feasting on the Word

SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 2, March 2, 2020

Patricia Farris, *Late Night Seminary: John 3:1-17*, January 30, 2002