

2nd LENT: March 12'17—A@GS

None of us would willingly walk into a mine field, where we risked being blown to bits with every step. Oddly enough though, sometimes our scripture lessons can unexpectedly push us into a spiritual “mine field.” Today’s lessons are just such “mine field” passages, causing us to walk carefully and reflect deeply, as we try to understand what God is saying to us.

In John’s Gospel, we hear this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a secret follower of Jesus.

Jesus replies to Nicodemus’ questions by saying, “Very truly, I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” 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?”

Hearing this conversation what popular, modern religious slogan comes to mind? If we answer “born again,” we’re right on the money. Even though neither Jesus nor Nicodemus uses these exact words, this is one of the primary passages of scripture that has given us “born again” as a way of describing a unique spiritual event.

Unfortunately, the phrase “born again” has become a spiritual landmine for God’s people. For some, it means that a person has experienced a very specific moment of being in God’s presence, undergoing a sudden conversion, like Paul on the road to Damascus. For others, their being “born again” occurred whenever they were baptized, with the years since then filled with their steady growth in Christ, a gradual being in and putting on Christ. Sadly, these two ways of interpreting the concept of being “born again” have sometimes divided rather than united God’s people.

Rather than getting mired in “born again” controversy, let’s look more closely at what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus so we can ignore the land mine. In their conversation, Jesus and Nicodemus are obviously talking past each other. Nicodemus is talking about the real birth process in which a child emerges from its mother’s womb. Jesus is talking, almost in poetic language, about a spiritual re-birth and growth that can take place at any time in a person’s life.

Though Nicodemus and Jesus generally talk past each other, there’s one thing they do agree on. Both of them see that physical or spiritual birth and growth are something that results in “new-ness,” in a completely new entity or creation.

Thinking in real terms, as Nicodemus did, there’s nothing as awesome as a new baby, is there? Here is a completely new person, one who has never been in the past and never will be again in the future. Thinking in spiritual terms as Jesus did, there’s nothing as awesome as a person who has been born of the spirit—whenever and however that process works. Here, too, is a completely spiritually new person, one who is totally unique in the universe, one who has never been in the past and never will be again in the future.

While neither Nicodemus nor Jesus get into specifics, much of their conversation has to do with the SOURCE of the new-ness they both describe. A newborn child is the result of the parents deciding to have a child “born of the flesh.” The new spiritual person Jesus describes is the result of the Holy Spirit’s and God’s working in a person’s life. This new spiritual being is not the result of anything the person is or does, but is the result of God’s free gift of the Spirit to that person.

All of us like to receive gifts, but receiving a large, unexpected gift can make us suspicious. God's renewing grace is perhaps the ultimate, large unexpected gift. We ask questions like *"What's the catch? And "What do I have to do in return for this gift?"*

This is the unstated question that Nicodemus seems to be asking as he talks to Jesus. And how does Jesus reply?

"The wind [or the Spirit] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

In other words, we can't control what God and the Holy Spirit do. All we can do is receive God's large, unexpected gift of grace with gratitude and faith.

In our Old Testament lesson, we see that faith certainly kept Abram going when God's spirit blew upon him. Unlike the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, God alone comes to Abram with a very specific message. God says to Abram:

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to a land that I will show you. I will bless you and make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

While we don't hear Abram's response to this startling message, we can imagine what must have been going through his mind--thoughts like *"What?"* And *"Who, me?"* and *"Really?"*

However, Abram knew that his God could be trusted, no matter what messages God delivered. Despite his misgivings, Abram had faith.

"So, Abram went, as the Lord told him." He went not knowing the way or the destination. That is faith.

Writing to the Romans, Paul describes Abraham as a righteous servant of God, one whose righteousness was a result of his unshakeable faith in God. Paul says, *“Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”* Paul goes on to describe Abraham’s belief in a God who *“gives life to the dead, and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”*

Once again, faith in God achieves the good for humanity God desires.

Just as faith was essential to Abraham and Nicodemus all of those centuries ago, faith is essential to us here and now. This is especially true as we “walk the pilgrim way of Lent.” In today’s collect we prayed that our gracious God would:

“bring us with penitent hearts and steadfast faith, to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ, your son...”

With God’s help, our faith will allow us to confidently experience the unpredictable Holy Spirit, whichever way it gently blows for us, and to set out on whatever new path God may set before us during the 40 days of Lent.

AMEN.

The Rev. Katharin K. Foster