

Courage to lose sight of the shore Lent 2
Gen 12:1-4a; Rom 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17
Responsive Reading: Psalm 121

There was a very cautious man
Who never laughed or played;
He never risked, he never tried,
He never sang or prayed.
And when he one day passed away
His insurance was denied;
For since he never really lived,
They claimed he never died!

This poem reflects our theme today. Much has been said about risk taking, responding or not, to new opportunities, and living life to the fullest. Jesus wants to give us courage to lose sight of the shore line. God calls us out of familiar and comfortable places in our lives. We are continually invited into new challenges, new ways of being, thinking and doing. As we respond to this invitation, the Almighty shows us a deeper experience of Divine Presence.

As we face questions about the future of this congregation, in the midst of a changing world, we can find renewed faith and strength to work together, listening to the Holy Spirit, as we are shown ways forward in faith.

We see this theme in a variety of quotes that are related to sailing. "We cannot discover new oceans unless we have courage to lose sight of the shore." Christopher Columbus

"No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit." Helen Keller

"There are some things you learn best in calm, and some in storm." Willa Cather

"A ship in the harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for." William Shedd

Hudson Taylor, the great man of faith who founded the China Inland Mission, integrated faith and risk. When we study his missionary life, we find he did a number of things that his

original mission board detested. But Hudson showed a successful way of doing evangelism. He said, "Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith."

Lent is a time to slow down and breathe in the life of Jesus. It is a long and difficult journey to the cross, but as we pay close attention, Jesus shows us who he is and invites us to join him on a journey. Our overall Lenten theme is, "Show Us." We want assurance that this Christianity faith works, for ourselves and so we can let others know about it. As we work at having open hearts and minds, Jesus can give us a deeper understanding and relationship with him. Our hearts desire is for Jesus to show us who he is, who we are, and who we can be.

Many people have said the seven last words of the church are: "We've never done it that way before." But this church has experienced and come through many changes –some thrust on us and many intentional. Some cosmetic and many deeply spiritual. Some functional and a few to adjust to changing circumstances and desires. Some decisions have been simply practical and some more risky than others.

Our sermon seed today is God called Abraham and Nicodemus – one physical action and faith, the other adjusting their belief system toward Jesus, God's Son, which was a radical risky move for a Jewish religious leader.

Let's remind ourselves about Abraham. Try to imagine you are an ordinary man in the Middle East about 4,000 years ago. You're sitting by a campfire with your wife, and you hear a voice. You don't see anything, but you sense something – outside of you, but inside of you as well. Is it indigestion? Or is it someone speaking to you? The voice continues. "I want you to drop everything and just start moving to some new place you don't know about." You check the bushes. Nobody there. You pinch yourself. Nope. Not dreaming. You ask Sarah if she hears anything. She doesn't. Maybe you sense that something extraordinary is going on.

“Abraham, this is God speaking. I want you to leave everything. Go to the land I will show you.”

“Where’s that?”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“Its 1500 miles from here in a place called Canaan.”

“Never heard of it.”

“I know, and guess what else?”

“What?”

“I’m going to make you the father of a great nation.”

“That’s impossible. I don’t have any children.”

“Don’t worry.”

“What do you mean, don’t worry?”

“Just trust me.”

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You want me to leave everything, travel across the desert to someplace I’ve never heard of, and become the father of a great nation.”

“Right.”

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“No.”

So Abram left home. When people make a move like that it’s because they are fleeing toward what they hope is safety, or to an opportunity. But Hebrews 11 interprets this move, saying: “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”

Think of Abram’s adventure. He was 75 years old. Adventure is only for the young – isn’t it? What thoughts ran through his mind? What emotions surged in his heart? What fears rose up to challenge him? What about Sarah? Did she get excited with this idea? Was their call a welcome opportunity or a distinctly unwelcome proposal? We have no indication what Sarah and Abraham felt about this. We can’t tell if they relished it or hated it. What is clear is they accepted, even though it was obviously a big risk. And despite the various difficulties they ran into, we read the Almighty’s faithful loving presence accompanied and protected them. Today the whole world has been blessed by them.

In ways we can only imagine, the Almighty communicated with Abraham and his wife Sarah, and told them to drop everything and start walking. But why them? God could have called on someone younger. And we know they didn’t live perfect lives of faith. In fact church history is full of imperfect saints – who sailed out of sight of shore. They were not afraid to fail. But most succeeded in their call.

We know they experienced fear during their journey. The Bible talks about God choosing Abraham for a special mission but it doesn’t mean that Abraham and his people were extraordinary special people. They were ordinary people but God used them in an extraordinary way. The Creator’s purpose was to create a people, who would obey, go and choose to follow his Son Jesus.

John Ortberg in his book- “If You Want To Walk On Water You’ve Got To Get Out Of The Boat” says this about fear: “The single command in Scripture that occurs more often than any other, God’s most frequently repeated instruction, is formulated in two words: Fear Not. He says, “Do not be afraid. Be strong and courageous. You can trust me. Fear not.”

Why does God command us not to fear? Fear does not seem like the most serious vice in the world. It never made the list of the Seven

Deadly Sins. No one ever receives church discipline for being afraid. So why does God tell human beings to stop being afraid more often than he tells us anything else?

My hunch is that the reason the Creator says “Fear Not” so much is *not* that God wants us to be spared emotional discomfort. In fact, usually the Almighty says it to people who are asked to do something that is going to lead them into greater fear! I think God says, “fear not” so often because fear is the number one reason human beings are tempted to avoid doing what God asks them to do” (117,118).

The Bible and church history, is full of many people who have all found themselves having to fear not, to take big risks when they were challenged by God. This includes many in the history of North Star. If you like, they were taking a leap into the unknown – and this happens in regular years as well as leap years.

And what about Nicodemus? As a member of the hostile Jewish ruling council, he stuck his neck out at least 3 times – to learn from Jesus, to protect Jesus and then to honor him. His life and faith views were disturbed. He wanted to figure Jesus out. He didn’t like being upset. He wanted an orderly neat controllable theology.

But Jesus didn’t really calm him down. I suspect Nicodemus left that night with more questions. And that’s what faith is often like. I offer this quote as an analogy. “A calm sea does not produce a skilled sailor.” It’s the same for believers, for people of faith.

So Nicodemus snuck in at night to talk with Jesus. Next, when the Sanhedrin wanted to go after Jesus, Nicodemus upset some of his colleagues when he reminded them that the law requires a person be heard before being judged. The third time we hear about Nicodemus is when he provided the embalming spices and assisted Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus’ body for burial. This was risky for a Jewish religious leader.

So we have this rich story about being born from above, born anew, the Son of Man, the kingdom of God, the true light and judgement. Nicodemus wanted to understand what Jesus meant when he said, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” Nicodemus, even though he was a religious leader, was on a journey of faith. And it was a risky journey because of what happened to Jesus and his followers.

We don’t know what happened to Nicodemus. Did he become a follower of Jesus? It’s worth wondering because he brought an extraordinary amount of burial spices for the preparation of the body. 75 pounds or 34 kilograms. Did he deliberately weigh down Jesus’ body with so many spices that consequently there will be no doubt that Jesus would remain in the tomb? Or did he go overboard in honoring Jesus?

As much as Christians quote John 3:16, we still sense that the term believing in Jesus has some ambiguity. Perhaps this has to do with how belief is played out in the Fourth Gospel. We tend to talk about “our faith” or “having faith,” assuming that it is a done deal, that believing is as simple as acquiring faith and owning it.

But the Gospel of John never refers to faith as a noun. Faith is not a possession, not something that one gets, not something that one has. It is something that one does. Believing for the characters in the Fourth Gospel is a verb. And as a verb, believing is subject to the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the indecisiveness of being human. We need to ask more often than we are willing to admit, “how can these things be?”

We need to take seriously what faith looks like when it is active, living, permeable, & dynamic. We need to consider that having an incarnated God requires an incarnational faith. And that believing is just as complicated as it is to be human. Faith in Jesus goes way beyond an intellectual logical exercise, because it must seep into the core of our being. It becomes who we are. As this occurs in us, we see the

extent of the Almighty's loving presence in us and around us. Our eyes, ears & hearts open up.

Read against the backdrop of Nicodemus' night time visit, John 3:16 becomes the culmination of the response to him and people like him, and perhaps like us, who believe they know Jesus and who come to him, not to be turned upside down by his holy newness but to have their understanding affirmed and settled. Read in its entirety the passage becomes about realizing that rather than our faith resting on our love and knowledge, it is, in the first place, we who are known and loved by God, drawn into a mystery that is beyond our understanding and wisdom.

Jesus picks up on words & concepts introduced by Nicodemus and turns the conversation toward deeper truths again and again. This text in some ways can be compared to learning a language – the terms of faith in Jesus. We know each language has words and terms that really can't be fully translated. And we know that often language is so limited in expressing inexpressible terms – even with lots of words. What Jesus says is simple. But living it out can be very complicated and confusing at times.

So read this interaction of Jesus and Nicodemus slowly out loud this week. Put yourself in his place. Nicodemus was struggling to understand this man who claimed to be the Son of God! And does incredible miracles as a sign of this.

With each repetition Jesus shifts the conversation from the smallness of Nicodemus' view to the largeness of life in God; from the signs on which Nicodemus and others base their hope to the invisible mystery of the Spirit / wind (the two words are the same in Greek), which can give him birth into the truth that he is missing.

The stories of Abraham's call and Nicodemus', are I believe, another NT – OT link to help us understand our Creator. Both events invite us to sail out of sight of the familiar shore. When we become too sure of what we know about Jesus, or the Trinity; when we believe that we have grasped God at last; that is when we can

perhaps expect to be undone like Nicodemus was. Struggling to understand is always hard.

That undoing - that overturning of our certainty - may be a very good thing, if it allows us to experience again the miracle of our birth from above into eternal life. This has nothing to do with what we know or what we are.

It is a gift of life from the heart of the Father, breathing the Spirit wind over us and through us and in us. This opens our infant eyes to the Son, our Teacher, lifted up to draw all people to himself and his lesson of love. And then we get a faint glimpse of the Almighty's loving presence when we listen to God's calls and dive in to try to understand and worship our Savior. Most of all we are called out and invited to follow, to risk, to a life that sails out of sight of the shore.

To end I will quote Jeannie Curryer, from the Overseas Crusade (OC) Missionary Prayer Letter in September, 1997. She quotes Sir Francis Drake. Let us pray.

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little, when we arrive safely because we have sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the waters of life; having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity; and in our efforts to build a new earth, we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push us into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love. In Jesus' Name, Amen.