

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Gen.12: 1-4a; John 3:1-17

Two stories. Two very different men. One man, Abram, hears the voice of God, puts the house on the market, has a garage sale, gets two or three estimates from van lines, and follows the moving van down the highway to only God knows where. If there were questions and uncertainty, we are not told about it. If his wife threatened to divorce him should he do such a foolish thing, we don't know that, either. The story of Abram is cut and dried. God said go. Abram went.

The other story is not so cut and dried. Nicodemus is hesitant. Wary. Tentative. He sneaks in the back door of the synagogue for the evening service and sits there in the shadows—last pew, back there in the corner. He waits until everyone else has left. Then he comes to Jesus, with questions on his mind. It's almost as if Nicodemus is there that night to trip Jesus up, to trap the teacher. He's a Pharisee after all. Nicodemus seems set to argue with Jesus and to force Jesus to prove himself. Nicodemus struggles and wrestles with Jesus' teachings. He is not about to treat this as if it is a simple matter. We're not told in this story what Nicodemus decides. Only near the end of John's Gospel does it become clear to us that Nicodemus chose to follow Jesus, after all the questions were asked. For, it is Nicodemus who is there when Jesus is taken down from the Cross, bringing the spices for Jesus' burial.

Two stories. Two men. Two very different tales. One man who obeyed God without hesitation. The other one who argued and challenged and resisted and held back. So what do these men have in common?

One thing. There is one thing which brings Abram, who later was renamed Abraham, and Nicodemus, who lived some 2000 years later, together. Both stories are stories of a beginning. Abraham and Nicodemus are both embarking on a journey. A lifetime journey. A pilgrimage.

You see, it is the idea of the journey, the pilgrimage, the being on the road, which is important here.

It's not the way we commonly think about the Christian life. We read the stories at their simplest level. Abraham obeyed God and became the father of our faith. Nicodemus questioned Jesus, was "born again" and that settled that. We like to think of our faith as sure and true and settled. But it isn't like that.

Read on into Genesis and we see that it was not so simple for Abraham and Sarah. The journey ahead of them was a risky one, one in which they were often uncertain, one where it often seemed that God had forgotten the promises and so they tried to take things into their own hands. This was a pilgrimage for Abraham and Sarah, a journey which they were compelled to take, in order to seek their home in God. In the Old

Testament way of thinking, that is a place, the land of Canaan, the land we now call “the holy land,” the modern day state of Israel and what some would call Palestine.

For Nicodemus, also, this was no one-time choice to follow Jesus. Not just a decision made one night at an evangelical revival. Consider the metaphor which Jesus uses, the idea that one must be born from above or to be born anew of the Spirit. That alone tells us that it is no one-time, set in cement, choice. In the New Testament way of thinking, the pilgrimage becomes a spiritual one. This is a journey which Nicodemus had to make, an inner passion to follow after Jesus Christ, a seeking after God which became the directive force of his life from that time on.

The stories define the Christian life for us. Simply to be Christian means we must be on the road, always and forever on a journey, a pilgrimage toward our final home with God.

In a sense, we are all like the goat lady in the novel, *Cold Mountain*. As the wounded Civil War soldier makes his way through the back roads and hills toward home, he stops to stay for a while with a goat lady. She lives in what was then called a “caravan,” apparently some sort of wagon which was a fore-runner of the modern day camper trucks and motor homes. In order to survive, the goat lady sells cheese and trades the goats for flour and other necessities when her herd gets too large to handle. After a good sleep and a meal, the soldier asks the goat lady why she lives in the caravan. Is she traveling? Does she move continually from one place to another? How long has she lived in this place?

The goat lady goes to her cupboards and gets out her journals, books in which she has recorded the antics and habits of the goats over the years. Finally, she finds the pages which record her early days in this place. And she says, “I’ve lived here for 26 years now. No, it is 27 years, since I came here.” The hero asks, “Why do you continue to live in this caravan, if you’ve been here so long? Why don’t you build a more permanent place?”

The goat lady responds: “One never knows when it is time to move on. I always have to be ready to get on the road again.”

And, that my friends, is the story of the Christian life. It is no one-time decision. It is no simple act of obedience. It is a lifelong journey, an inner passion that grips at our hearts and compels us and urges us to get up and to keep on moving. To keep on searching and seeking for the place where God will lead us, the place where our souls will be made whole, the place where we will finally feel “at home” with ourselves and with God.

For most of us our journey begins when we are little. Perhaps at Baptism if we were baptized as infants. If we are blessed with good Christian parents they tell us the stories of Jesus and how he loves the children. So we begin with the experience of our parents love and we identify that with the love of Jesus. We travel along the road with

our parents for a while. As we grow friends begin to travel with us. According to James Fowler, who wrote a book called *Stages of Faith*, as children we experience our faith as literal and kind of magic and God as a big magician in the sky. Then as we travel further and get a bit older, we move on to conventional religion, the religion of our peers and the church in which we are brought up. Some people do get off road here, but most others keep on trucking along. Some move on to a rational phase of faith development where they try very hard to prove the existence of God and find rational answers to all their faith questions. When we finally realize that faith is not rational, usually somewhere in midlife, that God cannot be scientifically proven some of us let go of our faith and others accept the irrationality of it and move on to an understanding of symbols and metaphor and the value of ritual and the truth in apparent contradictions. There's a sixth stage of faith what so few of us attain that I won't even talk about it. It's reserved for the Mother Therasas and Albert Schweitzers of our world.

Those are normal stages of faith development but whatever stage we find ourselves in, the events of our lives impact our faith. The death of someone we love or the horrors of war or the big eyes of a starving child challenge us. "Why God?" we cry. Some of us lose our faith then, others find a satisfactory answer for themselves or learn to live without the answer. Some of us are challenged by friends of other faiths. "Who's right and who's wrong?" we wonder. Some of us are challenged by the books we read. Some of you found your faith challenged by the book we read in our recent book discussion. Some of us are challenged when we hear God's voice calling us to work we may not think we want to do, or to sacrifice money we may have pegged for another use. When we see and hear terrible things that some people do in the name of Christ it makes us wonder who we and they can claim the same Christ as our Savior. The challenges are myriad – assaults on what we thought we believed. We are constantly forced to reconsider what we thought should be a constant. It is a lifelong journey.

Now, I don't know about you, but I do know about me. Being on a lifelong journey, a pilgrimage, even if it is a spiritual one, doesn't sound like the Good News of the Gospel to me. I want to settle in. I want to stay somewhere. Live somewhere long enough that I can put up the curtains, hang the pictures, decorate the bathrooms, create a home. I call it my nesting instinct.

But the Christian life is about living out of a suitcase. It is about always being ready to move along the way, never coming to a place where we can settle down and nest in. The most we get is a few stopping places along the way, some rest areas where we can pull off the road for a while and stop and use the facilities and walk the dog and eat a bit of lunch.

So where's the Good News in this?

The life of a Christian person, the person who follows Christ, is not an easy one, my friends. It is not real fun and games to be on the road all the time, on the road again, always going, going, and going. Always seeking to be at home, at home with God.

But there is one who goes with us, and it is that very one we seek - God—, the God who is our help, our strength, and our hope. The God who will not let our foot stumble. The God who does not sleep but walks the road with us. The God, who walked in our human shoes and knows what it is like to be weary and worn out and tired and afraid. The God who keeps us from evil and who will keep us in this time—today, tomorrow, and evermore.

So, be prepared my friends. Keep your suitcase packed. Ready to be on the road again. Our help does come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. God who made us and chose us and called us to be the roadrunners of our day.