

Genesis 12.1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4.1-5, 13-17; John 3.1-17

The Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you...” And . . . Abram went, as the Lord had told him.

Where on Earth do you think that Abram imagined that he was going?! How many of us would move lock stock and barrel unless we had orders in-hand, or a contract, or a job offer? Abram had no clue where he was going. Nor Sarah. But God said “Go” and they went.

Abraham didn’t need to know where he was going, because he *knew* God. The knowledge that comes of faith is not so much concerned with the details – the how and where and why of life... The knowledge that comes of faith is that which allows us to imagine all kinds of possibilities. If we know – in our hearts – that God is with us and before us and beside us, then we can imagine following God – even into the unknown.

Last Sunday in his sermon, David introduced the idea of imagination that is powered by God’s Word. The human imagination is a marvelous thing, but I want us to be careful about the way we think about imagination...because there are different ways to apply this faculty. For example...Just the other day I was asking my ten-year-old son Jonathan what he could imagine. He said, “I can imagine a house FULL of legos!” I said, “Jonathan...we already *have* a house full of legos.”

We can imagine a lot of things that have nothing to do with God’s imagination. We can all imagine having financial security, and job security, and – well – security security. We can imagine that our children will never be hurt, and will always make the team, and will get into the college of their choice. We can imagine success and happiness and long life and living well. But this kind of imagination is very human.

This morning I want to talk to you about a different kind of imagination – the imagination that opens for us larger possibilities and that calls us into a different way of being in the world; This imagination the stirs us to know that the Kingdom of God is real. This is the imagination of faith. The poetic and mystical language of the Gospel of John opens for us the door to the imagination of faith.

David’s sermon last week prepared us for these Sundays in Lent when we work our way through the Encounter Stories in the Gospel of John. In these stories, David said, Jesus will encounter various folks whose imaginations are imprisoned with how things seem to be. And that Jesus will unfold sweeping vistas of utterly unsettling possibilities of how the world might be instead. In today’s gospel according to John, Jesus encounters Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a teacher of Israel. This man, Nicodemus, is powerful and well-connected among the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem, confident in his knowledge and status. But what he does is quite remarkable. Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night and says to him, “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God because no one can do the signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”

Lent II – RCL Year A

Nicodemus comes to Jesus *in the night*. What compels him to go there? Clearly, he does not want to be seen. And yet he comes to Jesus. What does Nicodemus imagine that he will find? The expected Davidic Messiah who will free Israel from the Roman occupation and restore all Israel?

If this is what Nicodemus imagines that he will find, Jesus sorely disappoints him. For what Jesus tells Nicodemus is that “in order to see the Kingdom of God, you must be born again.”

What?!?!

Nicodemus cannot imagine what Jesus means by this. How can one be born again after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born? How can this be?!

Nicodemus knows a lot: he is an old and learned man, a Pharisee, a teacher. But he does not understand. For what Jesus is saying is not concerned with the knowledge of Torah but with the imagination of an entirely different way of being. All of Nicodemus’ knowledge does him no good here. He cannot imagine what Jesus is talking about. He cannot imagine this new way of being. Nicodemus could not imagine what it meant to be born again of water and spirit. His knowledge was of no help here...

And we too, find ourselves in situations when all our knowledge is of little use. For me, seminary is a humbling experience as I am reminded daily of all that I do not know. The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don’t know. I trust that I am not alone in this experience...

There is a great deal of difference between knowing something in one’s head and knowing something in one’s heart. This knowing ‘by heart’ is the knowledge of faith.

What do you know by heart?

You may have heard all your life that God loves you. But do you know it – by heart. It is one thing to know that God loves you here (point to head). It’s a radically different thing to know that God love you here (point to heart).

The encounter story with Nicodemus ends with two verses that are ‘known’ to most of us. We see them referenced on a poster behind home plate every baseball season: John 3:16.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believed in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Okay, you probably ‘know’ this passage. Yes? It is familiar. Do you believe what this passage says? Do you know this verse – by heart, in your heart?

God so loves YOU that he gave his Son, Jesus Christ, so that you may have life. Do you believe it? Can you imagine that?

Lent II – RCL Year A

If you do believe this, did you always, or did you come to this realization over time? I know many people who have struggled in their spiritual journey to truly believe – by heart - that God loves them. For how does one comprehend the unconditional love of God if she has not experienced unconditional love? How do we ask the neglected child, the abandoned mother, or the homeless veteran to trust that God loves them when they have not known unconditional love? How can one – who has not known love – imagine God’s unconditional love and grace and mercy?

Coming to know Jesus is a process. To truly believe that you are known by God, beloved of God, son or daughter of God - that is the journey of faith. And this journey of faith transforms us.

On Ash Wednesday, Susan invited us to consider Lent as a gift of time. Lent is a time, she said, to step back from habits of self-concern and self-sufficiency, to turn and re-turn toward God and our neighbor. Lent is a time to consider how we known – and are known by – God.

How do you imagine that God knows you?

Can you imagine that God really and truly sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, so that you might have eternal life?

This human world corrupts our imagination. We forget that through God’s grace our imagination is not bound by the norms and narrowness of our culture or customs. Through God’s grace and God’s gift of Jesus Christ, we are empowered to imagine the possibility of the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Can you envision a world in which God’s commandment to love our neighbors is realized? God calls us, through our faith, to create a world at peace – not war. God calls us to work in collaboration with our neighbors to create a green Burundi or safer streets or quality education for all. God calls us to feed the hungry and clothe the poor and heal the sick. Through faith we are called to not only imagine, but to enact a world in which the dignity of every human being is respected.

This is the radical vision of the Kingdom of God. This is the Kingdom which Jesus brought near to us. And this is the very Kingdom which many have struggled to grasp.

This is God’s imagination. This is God’s call to us. But we can only live into this call if we know – by heart – that God loves us. We can love our neighbors only if we are certain of the knowledge that God loves us.

I invite you to imagine how you feel when you know with utter certainty that God loves you. I invite you to consider how your belief in Jesus Christ has and is and will transform you. I invite you to imagine in what ways God would have you love your neighbor.

I invite you to observe a Holy Lent. Spend time considering how you – a beloved son or daughter of God – can imagine bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.