

Lent 2A, March 8, 2020  
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Imagine a spectrum: Beginner---Expert

Where on that spectrum do you most like to be?

Where do you feel most comfortable? Most secure?

Where do you feel most ALIVE?

Being a beginner might be enlivening, but for many of us, it is rarely comfortable.

Even when it's limiting, there is something that *feels* like security in familiarity and relative expertise.

Starting over---Leaving a familiar church, career, home, or relationship, letting go of familiar habits, or thought patterns, or coping strategies, or beliefs --might be liberating, and life-giving, and necessary, but it is rarely *comfortable*.

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BALLET EXAMPLE: I was thinking the other day about my experience as a young person in ballet (I suspect the same holds true in music, and sports, and most other disciplines)....

We all have experience starting over. We all have experience at being beginners. Even if we don't choose it, the opportunity--or the necessity--of beginning again is thrust upon us, time and again, throughout our lives.

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## [LIMINAL TIME]

For me the hardest part of a new beginning, is usually not the new beginning, per se, as much as the ending that precedes it...and the inevitable period of liminality--of uncertainty and transition--that lies between what was before and what is yet to be.

This is the real wilderness time---That time when we see clearly what we have to leave behind, but we don't yet see clearly where we're headed...

LEAVE ballet....but what's next?

LEAVE San Francisco...but what's next?

LEAVE previous job...but what's next?

God calls us out of security...into uncertainty

...out of the known...into the unknown

God calls us out from being a leader...to becoming a disciple

...From being an expert...to becoming a novice...

God calls us out from a place of strength...into a place of vulnerability

... from independence...into utter and complete dependence

It's really very Lenten, isn't it?

God calls us out from civilization into the wilderness...

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Today's Scriptures:

We are not alone...our brothers Abram & Nicodemus have been there, too.

Genesis-Abram

Gospel-Nicodemus

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REAL RISK in beginning again.

REAL RISK for Abram & Sarai in heading out into the desert without protection of family...

REAL RISK for Nicodemus in laying aside the protection of experience and expertise and position of authority in the community...to follow Jesus.

(There's a reason he came BY NIGHT)

The million dollar question: IS IT WORTH IT?

Does the potential benefit of what lies ahead outweigh the certain cost of what we're leaving behind?

The answer really depends on who's issuing the invitation...

And this is where it gets theological. Because up until now, this sermon could have been a "pep talk" on embracing a "beginner's mind" given by your coach, or your teacher, or your therapist...

But if the Gospels are not just talking about a new SKILL but a whole new LIFE, if the Gospels invite us to believe it might be GOD who is inviting us into the wilderness of new beginnings---then we have to ask: just who IS this God? Is this God someone we should be listening to? Just how trustworthy is this God?

[FAITH: IN THE EPISTLE]

In today's Epistle, Paul writes:

*“Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”*

“BELIEVE” = “Put our Trust in”

*So Abraham put his trust in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. For this reason God's promise depends on faith...in the presence of the God in whom Abram put his trust, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*

Okay. I don't know about you, but if the God who is calling me into the wilderness of new beginnings is, in fact, a God whose track record includes “giving life to the dead and calling into existence the things that do not exist”...that's pretty compelling.

[FAITH: IN THE GOSPEL]

(Familiarity breeds contempt...can we come to this scripture as a beginner?)

*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever puts their trust in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who puts their trust in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

Stakes get higher...can we put our trust in God? Can we put our trust in Jesus?

(For lack of a better metaphor) In Jesus, God puts God's money where God's mouth is.

God calls Abram from his homeland into the wilderness of the unknown

God calls us from our homelands of familiarity and expertise into the wilderness of new beginnings...

What makes us think we should put our trust in this God?

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.....And the Word became flesh and lived among us....*

The God who calls Abraham & Sarah and you and me into the wilderness of new beginnings is the God who, in Christ, left his own heavenly homeland to sojourn in OUR strange land, pitch his tent among us...

God calls Nicodemus to leave his place of strength, and authority and expertise as a “teacher of Israel” in order to be “born from above”

God calls us to leave our places of strength, and authority and expertise in order to embrace the vulnerability and dependence of newborn babies so that we can see the Kingdom of God.

What makes us think we should put our trust in this God?

*And while they were in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

The God who calls Nicodemus and you and me to be born from above is the God who, in Christ, entered the world as a defenseless babe--naked except for swaddling bands, his only shelter some creature's stall.

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*“Indeed,” today’s Gospel says in one of the most powerful lines in all of Scripture, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

*Indeed, God did not call Abram & Sarai to leave their homeland to destroy them, but in order that they might be saved and blessed, and the world might be blessed through them.*

*Indeed, God did not call Nicodemus to be born from above to destroy him, but in order that he might be saved and blessed, and the world might be blessed through him.*

*Indeed, God does not call us to start over, to begin again, in order to destroy us, but in order that we might be saved and blessed, and the world might be blessed through us.*

Where in your life, is God calling you to risk starting over?

Where in your life, is God calling you to risk becoming a beginner?

Where in your life, is God inviting you to step into the unknown?

Where in your life, is God inviting you to be born again?

Can you Trust that *“The One who calls you is faithful...”*?

Will you dare to become a beginner?

Will you risk receiving new life?

