

Rev. Cody Natland
 March 5, 2023
 Sermon - Moran UMC
 Gen. 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

Seeking: How Do We Begin Again?

Reintroducing the *Seeking* Series

This morning, we continue our Lenten worship series, *Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith*. We are invited throughout these forty days of Lent to join the ancestors of our faith in asking hard, honest questions about our faith and how we live it out. We come exploring answers to age-old questions, but we also come with our own questions, longings, hopes, and needs.

We all have our own questions, as well, and each of us comes to worship seeking something different and unique to our lives and faith journeys. We might be seeking a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, or a first-time connection with the Lord. We might be seeking community with our church family, or opportunities to go out into the world to serve. We may be seeking clarity, wonder, justice, balance. We are seeking our calling, seeking hope, seeking grace, and seeking forgiveness.

Whatever it is that you are seeking, I pray that our worship throughout this season will help you to seek it and to find it.

Poem by Sarah Speed

Our *Seeking* question this morning comes from the interaction between Nicodemus and Jesus — *How do we begin again?*

Throughout our lives, we find ourselves in seasons of new beginnings. Sometimes these are chosen and welcomed — graduation from school, a move to a new community, marriage, a promotion at work. Other times, new beginnings are thrust upon us, unwelcome — the death of a loved one, a devastating fire, divorce, the loss of a job.

In a poem that she wrote for this worship series, Rev. Sarah Speed reflects on the various feelings we might carry with us into these new beginnings — feelings of anxiety and doubt, feelings of anticipation and hope... And, ultimately, the sense of seeking and grasping for solid footing. She writes:

How do we begin again?
 Do we slide into something new?
 Do we make a formal announcement? *Dearest reader,*
I have decided to begin again. Do we turn gradually, a gentle yield
 in a new direction; or like a wave,
 do we crash onto the shore of a new day?
 Do we grieve the change? Are there breadcrumbs on the path?
 Will Nicodemus be there?
 Will it ever be easy?

I'm not sure exactly how we begin again,
 but I know that moths wrap themselves in silk,
 and after quite some time,

after many long nights,
 after days spent alone,
 they break out of their shell.
 They pull themselves out under open sky,
 and they spend the rest of their days chasing the light.

Maybe it's always that way with beginnings.
 Maybe it feels like the protective layer falling away.
 Maybe we have to go it alone at first.
 Maybe it feels like pulling and dragging yourself into something new.
 Maybe there's always open sky at the other end.¹

I love the way that Rev. Speed ends with that series of *maybe's*. New beginnings are times of maybes, where there are possibilities and opportunities, but things often remain unclear, unsettled, even ambiguous.

Called to New Beginnings

Abram's Response

Reflecting on some of my own new beginnings, I've always wondered how Abram and Sarai felt when they received God's instructions in the passage that we heard today. I referenced this passage just a few Sundays ago, in the way that God blessed Abram and Sarai not only for their own sakes, but for the sake of Israel and the world — "I will bless you," God says, "and [I will] make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

Because of their essential role in the story of the Israelites and God, we have a tendency elevate these heroes of faith to such a degree that it's hard to imagine the human emotions they must have felt. While we know how their story unfolded, it must have been a jarring experience for them to suddenly be uprooted. God commanded them to leave everything — their home, most of their family, their land — and to seek the land of Canaan and begin again. At 75 years old, Abram was called to start over. In my experience, even the new beginnings that we *know* are right, that we *know* are necessary, even the new beginnings that we have *chosen* and *welcome* are still daunting and have their share of fear and trepidation.

Whatever Abram's feelings may have been, whatever conversations might have taken place between Abram and Sarai — and, hopefully, Lot, who also went with them — we aren't given details. In verse 4, just 3 verses after the command is introduced, we are told simply, "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him."

And maybe it was that simple and straightforward for Abram. Maybe he was incredibly in tune with God before this particular calling, or perhaps he had a heart for adventure and a high tolerance for entering the unknown. There may be some of you here today who have a similar spirit, and the prospect of a new beginning brings excitement and an eager response.

Nicodemus' Response

¹ Rev. Sarah Speed, "*How do we begin again?*" | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org

For those who take a more measured approach to change and new beginnings, we also hear the story of Nicodemus this morning.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, which was the Jewish Council in Jerusalem made up of 71 elders and the final authority on questions of Jewish law. It seems that Jesus' ministry has caught the attention of the Sanhedrin, and Nicodemus has come to find out more about this Jesus guy straight from the source.

Nicodemus shows up to speak with Jesus under the cover of darkness, which suggests that he may have been afraid of being seen with Jesus or embarrassed about potentially being associated with such a controversial figure. It's vulnerable to look for something, to be unsure, to be in need, to feel like something is missing and to try to seek something without knowing where it will take you — so perhaps Nicodemus felt that the darkness offered him some shelter.

And so, Nicodemus comes seeking Jesus, to learn more about him, and perhaps to make a decision about whether or not to become a follower. He says to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus responds, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born..." — in Greek — "...*anōthen*."

The word *anōthen* is ambiguous and can be translated in three different ways — "again," "anew," or "from above." Nicodemus hears only the first option and he gets hung up on the physical impossibility of re-entering the mother's womb, and Jesus talking about the gift of being born from above by the Holy Spirit into God's kingdom.

Expanding the Conversation

I love that Jesus doesn't criticize Nicodemus or put him down for not recognizing the nature of the new beginning that Jesus is offering to him. With patience and grace, Jesus responds to Nicodemus, saying, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." That is, nobody can see the wonderful new thing that God is doing in the world without the *unexpected* and *uncontainable* Spirit of God, which "blows where it chooses." Nobody can enter the kingdom of God without *beginning again*.

Jesus points out that there are limitations to what can be taught *about* God's kingdom; to truly *see* and *experience* the kingdom of God, one must be "born from above" by the Spirit of God. We cannot fully understand the kingdom of God until our *lives* are changed, until not only our *view of the world* is transformed, but also our *orientation to the world*.

What Jesus offers isn't simply something that can be *learned* in a traditional sense — the kingdom of God can't be taught in a classroom or even in a synagogue or a church — but is a bigger truth that must be *felt*, *lived*, and *experienced* on the streets and around shared tables of fellowship. It's not about *admiring* the teachings of Jesus or being *impressed* by his miracles — it is about the *transformation of one's entire being* by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus goes on to share with Nicodemus the miracle of the incarnation — in what is probably the most well known of any scripture passage, and is seen by many as somewhat of the "condensed version"

of the entire Gospel — "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

And though it is often left off, the next verse is integral to the message, as well — "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."

The message that Jesus proclaims is a message of unmerited, unconditional love from God to all of creation. A message not of *condemnation*, but a message of *hope* and *wholeness*.

Beginning Again

So, how do we begin again? First, we have to believe that beginning again is *possible*. We have to trust that God is always up to something *new*, something *transformative*, something *hopeful*... And we have to be willing to step forward, out of or above the things that hold us back. To begin again, we must recognize the errors and limitations of our old ways, and seek better patterns.

Disciples are called to be *transformed by God* while also working to *transform the world*... Which sounds wonderful and all, but we also don't always like to step out of our comfort zones. We don't always like to do new things or make changes, because change is often difficult. The process of becoming a new creation threatens our current, cherished way of life. By its very name, *new life* suggests that the *old life* must fade away.

Beginning again means that we have to have the courage, curiosity, and openness to see and experience the world in new ways. To see the world as it *can be*, rather than the way that *it has been*, or the way we assume it *has to be*. It is to trust that God is capable of doing something beyond our wildest imaginings, beyond anything that we could dream from our finite, human perspective. It is to acknowledge that we are unfinished, that we are works in progress, seeking to be more closely aligned with God.

In his poem, *For a New Beginning*, Father John O'Donohue writes:

Though your destination is not yet clear
 You can trust the promise of this opening;
 Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning
 That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
 Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
 Soon you will home in a new rhythm,
 For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

May it be so. Amen.