

## *Newness of Life*

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Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
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Genesis 12 and John 3 suggest to us that the kingdom of God grows by crossing lines and boundaries of one kind or another, by moving from one land to another, one culture to another, by leaving one paradigm for another. The growth of the gospel, the growth of the beloved community, and our own personal growth in the kingdom, happen inside of this dynamic of leaving-and-entering, giving-and-receiving, dying-and-rising, letting go-taking on. The empowerment-from-above happens in the crossing-across. The pinch in all of this is that this crossing-across feels vulnerable and risky and disorienting.

In John 3, we are told that Nicodemus was a Jewish religious leader. So he was one of the elites, a powerful person in his community. And John's gospel goes to the trouble of telling us that when he came to Jesus with questions about his teaching, when Nicodemus came in the posture of a student, wanting to grow, the text tells us that he came "by night." Why include that detail? Why include the time of day when Nicodemus came to Jesus? The text could simply have said that he came to Jesus and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher from God." Why the detail that he came "by night"? We don't know for certain, but it sure smells like Nicodemus did not want everyone to know that he, a prominent leader in the community, was approaching this itinerant teacher for understanding. The pinch is that there was some risk involved for Nicodemus in leaving his comfort zone and crossing over to Jesus, because what if others found out and didn't like it?

In Genesis 12, Abram is 75 years old, and he and his wife Sarai have no children. However, they owned a significant amount of property and were likely rather comfortable among their extended family and in the place where they had made their home. That's when a summons comes to Abram from the Lord, who is about to make a new beginning, a new beginning that will bless all the families of the earth. God's new beginning will involve, and require, the participation of Abram and Sarai.

So God tells Abram, "You gotta go." God tells Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house." God's new beginning will require Abram to leave behind things to which he had grown accustomed. God says, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless *you*, so that in you, through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed." God's new beginning will be an experience of astonishing growth, and it will be a blessing that will be upon all families, all tribes, all nations. God is not just

blessing one people, or one country. God plans to bless all countries through this family.

But the pinch here is that God's new beginning, God's growth, and God's blessing involve Abram leaving. God's calling to bless all the families of the earth involves leaving and crossing over from that which was familiar, it involves letting go of that which was comfortable and safe for Abram. There was risk involved for Abram and Sarai, because what if things didn't go as they expected?

Last week, we were visited here at Lewinsville by Dr. Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi from Baylor University, who spoke with us about changes and transitions in the global church. In his presentations, Carlos shared a quotation from the Scottish scholar of mission, Andrew Walls, that the "lifeblood of historic Christianity" has always been located in "crossing cultural boundaries" and "cultural diffusion."<sup>1</sup> There is something basic and fundamental about the gospel of Jesus Christ - the Son of God who came from heaven to earth, who himself crosses the border between the divine and the human – there is something basic and fundamental about the gospel of Jesus Christ that lives in this exchange between different cultures and different peoples, that is never contained in one culture, or one nation, or one style of music and worship, or one language, or one ideology, or one political movement, or one race, or one way of learning. There is something fundamental about the gospel of Jesus Christ that lives and grows in the exchange between cultures. This cross-cultural dynamic at the heart of the gospel will always be something of a threat to every empire and every colonizing power and everything in us that wants to control how things turn out, that wants to keep things the way they are now, because the instinct to control things is characteristically about wanting to keep God's blessing the way we like it. And we cannot control the blessing of God.

My own Lenten practice this year is about trying to be mindful about what I have come to think of as "the space between." A class that I'm taking right now is encouraging us to notice and be mindful of what happens inside of us when we pass through a doorway or over a threshold of some kind, when we move through the *space between*, the transition from one space to another. The "space between" also applies to conversations and relationships, where I can have a strong tendency to collapse the space between us and merge with someone, trying to force agreement between us before it's ready, *or* to run away from the space between, to run away from someone when there is a difference of views, to be so uneasy about the tension and the conflicting views, that there is an exaggeration of the space between. Instead, during this Lent, I am trying to live in and be mindful of and to honor the space between.

If Andrew Walls is right about the lifeblood of historic Christianity being found in cross-cultural diffusion – and I think he is exactly right – then that means that God's

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2002).

Spirit is alive and at work in the space between. In the space between cultures, in the space between people as they learn from and relate to and challenge each other. In the space between generations, between the young and the old, as they learn from and relate to and challenge each other. Leaning into the spaces between, as Nicodemus and Abram and Sarai show us, involves risk and trust and vulnerability, but it will also yield growth and blessing, not just for us but for all the people of the earth.

Friends, towards what new boundary is the Lord calling you? What part of your comfort zone is the Lord calling you to step out of in your life? In what ways is God calling the church – here at Lewinsville, in our presbytery, in the church in North America – to enter more deeply into cross-cultural engagement for the sake of the gospel? Newness of life awaits us. To God and to God alone be all the glory. Amen.