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What a strange pair, I thought. This past week I was reading these passages, and muttering to myself, what a strange pairing of two readings. We always have something from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, and something from the Gospel. And greater minds than me have paired them together so that they somehow echo each other, or reinforce each other. But this morning is the patriarch Abram, *before* his name was changed to Abraham, in a conversation with God. And the Pharisee Nicodemus, in a conversation with Jesus.

It kind of intrigues me, since God is not a human being who walks around for you to have a chat with, that Abram was certain God was speaking to him, and he listened and followed God's instruction. But in the case of the Pharisee, who was speaking with the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, Nicodemus is not so sure that he was speaking with or listening to God.

The call of Abraham is a major anchor in the history of the Jewish people. They date their entire history back to Abraham, not to Adam and Eve. And they see that from Abram on, the God whom they worshiped was one who reveals himself, who makes himself known to human beings. These few verses from the Book of Genesis set the stage.

Now, if God was speaking to Abraham, it was all in his perception of that. After all, the story doesn't suggest that God was hollering to Abram out of a heavenly cloud, or whispering in his ear like a Bluetooth or an "iPod nano." We don't know how God was speaking. But we know that Abram was listening, and that he was convinced the two things he heard were coming from God:

One, that God had singled him out for a blessing. That would seem to be a wonderful thing. But so far, this isn't terribly different from a lot of certified nut cases on the streets. They all think that God is speaking directly to them, and that God is singling them out in particular for a wonderful blessing or mission or message.

But the second thing that Abram hears from God is that God was expecting him to move. "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

This is really strange. I mean, couldn't God just make me into a nice nation, right where I am, and make me somewhat great, or a really cool influence in the neighborhood? What difference did it make the Abram lived in Haran? Why did he have to move, in order for God to bestow on him a unique blessing?

I can't help wondering, was this a question of moving out of his comfort zone?

And then there is this strange pairing of the Genesis story with that of Nicodemus in an odd and secretive night visit with Jesus. What does this mean—that one must be "born again", an idea so wacky that Nicodemus either totally missed the point or was making fun of Jesus. "Oh, come on now. I'm a grown man. How am I going to crawl back in mother's womb (God rest her soul!) to be born all over again?"

But I wonder if here, too, the call of Jesus to be born again is a call to move out of our comfort zone. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. I don't want to unnecessarily parody or belittle Pharisees. They were not all bad guys. But if anything they were religiously pretty set in their ways.

Nicodemus was probably respected, stable, and having some means in the world. He thought he could please God and therefore achieve righteousness by doing all the required things of the law in the Bible. I know some Lutherans who would make good Pharisees. Loyal, faithful, respectable, stable, always trying to do the right thing, paying attention to what they think impresses God. And maybe secretly believing that their respectable lives *are impressive* to God.

But this wonderful passage is not about being respectable, or stable, or religiously set in your ways, like Jell-O is set in a mold. You've heard this before, I'm sure: "Lutherans, like Jell-O, are set in a mold. Don't ask any questions, just do as you're told."

Well, maybe Nicodemus wouldn't have made a good traditional Lutheran, because he asked questions like a good Jew. And this is the nature of spiritual growth, isn't it, that if we stop being stuck in the mold where we were formed, and start asking questions, it is likely we will be tweaked and shaken, un-molded and plopped down outside of our comfort zone.

So here's the simple connection between the story of Abram and the story of Nicodemus. With Abram, God's call was very specific and clear. Get up, Abram. Pack. I will bless you, but not here. You need to take a risk, follow me, and I will show you a very specific place where I want to plant you. You can call it "the Promised Land." But I will show you the way and the place.

But with Nicodemus, the call of Jesus, although Nicodemus heard it loud and clear, was a lot more fuzzy. Jesus' summons to Nicodemus was pretty much to change directions. Pick up, move on, reinvent yourself, be somebody different, *start over* spiritually, get ready for a big life transition.

Now, if the shoe fits . . . ? Wear it. This wasn't just a private lesson to one individual or they wouldn't have put it in the book, would they? This is for all of us — the word for "you" here is plural in the Greek language. Jesus was speaking to the plural "you" such as "you Pharisees" perhaps. And because the plural "we" are reading it today, does the shoe fit? "You Lutherans aren't going to see the Kingdom of God unless you start over; re-think all your staid and respectable ways. Unless you take risks. Unless you leave your fishing nets and your Jell-O molds behind, and step out of your comfort zones. To be a Christian is to be always ready to do something new when the opportunity of the Gospel opens a door, even just a crack. To be a follower of Christ is to actually follow him wherever he wants us to go.

My friends, you cannot follow Jesus by parking on your sofa with your remote control. To be a Christian to really *to expect* that because the world we live in is constantly changing, and we are called to follow Jesus into the world with a message of love and reconciliation, we are going to have to do a lot of changing in order to keep communicating God's love to this world.

A religion gets stuck. It's gets stuck because it continues to develop forms and familiar rituals and comfortable ideas and create cozy groups of predictable people.

But Jesus tells Nicodemus —and we are "listening in" to their conversation— you don't get it? How can you be a teacher in Israel if you don't understand that one must be have a "spiritual make-over." You must be willing to risk all, move into uncharted territory, think new thoughts, change the light bulbs that go on in your brains, shift your priorities, and stop clinging to what is here and now when what is coming next is coming "from above."

In the oldest manuscripts of John's Gospel, by the way, there are two variations. In one this reading suggests "you must be born again." And in the other one, the wording says, "You must be born from above." "Above" is a metaphor for God, isn't it? People like to say "the man upstairs," for the same reason. If your thinking comes from the man upstairs, you will think differently about

everything going on down here in your comfort zone.

Now, is this a one-time thing? A single paradigm shift from Old Covenant to New Covenant? Is the point Jesus lays out for this set-in-his-religious-ways Nicodemus that he had to stop being Jewish and start being Christian? I don't think so. Both religions have evolved tremendously over time, but always ever-so-slowly so as not to rock the boat. In the last two centuries in this country, Lutherans have shifted from Danish or Norwegian or German or Finnish to the English language. They have shifted from being mostly farmers to mostly living in modern cities. But they have taken it so slowly that the change is almost imperceptible.

Yesterday our Church Council met to talk about the future. Before we talked about goals and ideas and programs, we talked about the future. We talked about the dire predictions of, among others, a 74 year old Episcopal laywoman named Phyllis Tickle who reminded pastors recently that the future is coming, ready or not, and the future is not going to look like the past. The church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be and will not be your grandmother's church.

As much as we dislike change, and dislike leaving our comfort zones, *right here* we have the dis-comforting words of Jesus that says we must start all over again, think differently, leave our baggage behind, and get over our complacency.

Yet we also have the very *comforting* words of Jesus, "For God so loved the world." This is our only real comfort zone, isn't it?—to be embraced by the love of God when everything else seems uncertain, unpredictable, uncomfortable. Abram could not begin to imagine how different his blessed life would turn out, once he left his home country and followed God to a promised land. Nicodemus could not imagine what it really meant to ditch his safe and predictable, stable and respectable religion, but follow the one who truly speaks God's Word: Jesus Christ.

Maybe we, too, can't imagine the magnitude of change that life will dish out, or the change that we must make in order to cope and communicate God's Word to others. But take comfort: God so loved the world. Jesus did not come to condemn, but to redeem. God loves, God blesses, God calls and sends. And may the Spirit of God *change you* and prepare you for what lies ahead. Amen.