

March 16, 2014 / Second Sunday in Lent / David L. Edwards

### The Journey of Our Rebirth

Genesis 12:1-4

*So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.*

Psalm 121

*The Lord will keep you from all evil; God will keep your life.*

John 3:1-17

*"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."*

The readings this morning from Genesis, Psalm 121, and the Gospel of John, vividly express important dimensions of what we call the journey of faith.

First there is call. There is "something"--Life, Power, Energy, Spirit--that we name God, that is at the core of life and moves or draws us in its own directions. We live most fully by trusting our inward connection with and sense of that Reality, and living our lives by its movements and leadings. We speak of this as God's call and our response.

Abram responds to God's call to pull up stakes and go to a land that God will show him. Responding to this call, Abram will experience blessing, not only for himself but for the whole world. Abram takes his wife Sarai and leaves everything behind--home, family, livelihood--and moves out on this journey. He doesn't really know where he is going. He has to travel light, without hindrances or encumbrances. The essential thing is that he trust the call and the One from whom the call comes. That is the definition of faith in our scriptures. Not believing ideas or doctrines. Not a head trip, but a life trip, a way of living.

Into this little story is packed the essential nature and shape of the life of faith. It is growing in awareness and experience of call, and in trust and openness. These are things I heard and learned growing up in the church. Our lives are a gift and a blessing, and yet there is more. To live fully means to give ourselves to purpose, and that purpose is serving God by loving others, the world, and ourselves as God has loved us. My life through the years became a matter of discerning the ways I was to live out that sense of call. We are on this beautiful earth to discern and embrace, in every stage of our lives, the ways we are each given to serve life, our part in the whole of what God has created. To me, this is the essence of call.

Last Wednesday, the Chrysalis Mission Group gave a dinner for our guests from East Tennessee State University. These young people had chosen to spend their spring vacation traveling from Johnson City TN, to a strange place to do volunteer work for Lynchburg Grows. They did not even know each other until they signed up for this work trip. And they paid their own way. That's responding to call! They had also experienced blessings—they were no longer strangers to each other but friends, and staying in our retreat center and on these grounds had been an unexpected delight for them. One of the students, when he walked into the Lodge that evening, kept saying, half to himself, half aloud, "I'm so happy!" The blessings the group had experienced were evident.

As they shared with us about themselves, all of our young guests spoke in terms of call, though they did not use the precise word. They were searching and in ways had already begun to find that to which they wanted to give themselves. They didn't talk about making money or being famous or buying a big house or expensive car. They talked about becoming doctors and lawyers and teachers and physical therapists. As we older folks shared about ourselves, I realized that we were all talking about the same thing—call and response to call, discerning what we felt we were supposed to do or be or become, not from outward compulsion but inward discovery. The next morning, as I thought about this and the story of Abram, I realized in a deeper way that "call" is inherent in life itself. Call is in our spiritual DNA as human beings. It is part of our connection with the sacredness of life.

Responding to call means leaving some things behind. Things that detract from the life of love. Things that distract us from what matters most. Attachments, even to people, that take the place of our first belonging to God and living out of what God has given us to be and do. Much of our inward journey work is becoming aware and then letting go of the things that keep us from fullness of life. We are in the season of Lent. It is common to speak of "giving up something" for Lent. The giving up is important, but not for its own sake. We let go of things that inhibit our living as God created us to live and loving as God created us to love. It is "giving up" for the sake of receiving the blessing of life as God created it to be lived. Thus a question for us during Lent might be: What are the things I need to let go of in order to devote myself more fully and joyfully to what I feel God has called and gifted me to do? We can ask this as individuals and as mission groups.

The journey is open-ended, to "the land that God will show us". Living in faith means that we become more and more at ease with the notion that we, like Abram, really are not sure where it is going to take us! We grow in willingness to let the path unfold before us, or within us. We become more open and receptive because it is the journey to which God is

calling us, and by our faithfulness, our trustfulness, God is able to do something for the world through us. In this way, our lives, like Abram's, become a blessing to the world.

The journey can start any time. Abram was seventy-five years old when he took up this whole new way of living. Living by faith, by trust in God's presence, call, and leading, is something that can begin any time and it lasts our whole life long. Chronology is not important, but spirituality, living by the spirit, is. The journey may be more outward, as in Abram's case of leaving Haran for a new land, or it may be more inward, leaving old and unhappy ways of thinking about others, the world, and ourselves, and moving out toward new, deeper, and more liberating understandings and ways of seeing ourselves and the world, and God.

All of this sounds crazy and scary in a culture that clings to the notions of security, being in control, and knowing what is going on and what will happen. Leaving attachments that our culture tells us are crucial to our well being can be frightening. Psalm 121 speaks of the deepest dimension of our relationship with God, that God “keeps” us. This takes some explaining. Remember the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4? Cain is jealous because he thinks God favors his brother Abel. So he kills his brother. God calls out to Cain: Where is your brother? God knows full well what has happened, but is calling Cain to account. Then comes Cain's notorious answer: Am I my brother's keeper? The resounding opinion through the centuries is that Cain is guilty of NOT being his brother's keeper. We are supposed to “keep”, that is, take care of, each other. However, in the Bible, keeping and caring for one another are two very different things. Cain knows that only God is our keeper. The word is only applied to God in scripture, never to human beings. We belong to God. That is why Abel's blood has cried out to God. Our blood, our life, is from God and belongs to God alone. So, Cain has done precisely the thing that human beings are NOT to do with regard to one another—he has KEPT his brother in the ultimate sense. He has killed him. He has played God.

This is very important in reading Psalm 121, which is the supreme psalm of God's keeping of us, God's ultimate and deep care for our lives, our belonging to God alone. As we go on this life-long journey of following and trusting God and our relationship with God, we learn, bit by bit, a deep truth. Nothing can really harm us. We need not fear anything. We have everything we need, and nothing can be taken away from us. It is the discovery of a profound sense of security, that our lives are safe regardless of what happens to us. We can take risks without fear. We can let go of the things we once thought would bring us security or happiness or fulfillment. We can break through to new understandings because we aren't afraid to let go of the old ones. Outward circumstances no longer determine our inward

attitude and state of being. We can be joyful in our sorrow, courageous in our fear, unshaken when things seem to be falling apart. This is the experience of knowing God as our “keeper”.

Beginning to live in this way is like being born anew or again! In the reading from John's gospel, we have this wonderful and mysterious story of Nicodemus, a Pharisee, sneaking out at night to meet with Jesus. His Pharisee buddies would probably not approve, so he goes under the cover of night. The nighttime setting also symbolizes Nicodemus' lack of understanding and insight into his own spiritual tradition. He knows it in his head and probably follows it in outward obedience, but he doesn't REALLY know it, in his heart and soul and life.

This story shows us that the journey of faith, responding to call, trusting God in all things, dropping our fears and attachments, is like a rebirth, being “born from above” or “born of the spirit”. When we are small children, this is the way we live. It is the way God created us, and children can put us back in touch with this. They lead us into the kingdom of God, as Jesus said. But as we grow, we are infused with all kinds of thinking and values and fears and attachments—from family, education, religion, society. We grow out of touch with our true nature, our true selves. So it takes something like a new birth for us to come back to our true selves, to wake up. This is what it means to be “born again” or “born from above”. The spiritual life is the process of being born anew, to our true life. At first it seems like something foreign to us. But as we go on the journey, we begin to see that it is the journey to who we really and truly are.

One last thing. At our morning worship last Wednesday, the passage from John's gospel had just been read. We were in silence. There came the sound of a flock of Canada geese passing overhead, honking through the air, probably headed toward our lake. The Celtic symbol of God's spirit is the wild goose—honking, stirring things up, riding the wind. Then there was the wind that came up that evening and blew through the night on into the next day. I remembered Jesus' words to Nicodemus: The wind blows where it chooses. We do not know where it comes from or where it goes. It is the same way with us, Jesus said, as we live by God's spirit, discerning and responding to God's call, willing to be led, to trust God's ultimate care, and to find in this way our true life, the life that comes from God. It is the way we were born to live.