

Lent A2

March 12, 2017

“Boot Camp for the Soul: Reset”

Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair

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Genesis 12:1-9

12Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...

John 3:1-17

3Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being **born from above**.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is **born of the Spirit** is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. **So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.**” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“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.

¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

1.

During this season of Lent I am preaching a sermon series with the title, “Boot Camp for the Soul.” I am asking us to do some hard work to strengthen our spiritual lives during these next 5 weeks. Last week I suggested we enlarge our understanding of temptation. Along with our personal temptations that affect the quality of our own lives I asked how we are also being tempted to deny our baptisms—that we are tempted to be quiet when prejudice or bigotry is taking place all around us—that we can be tempted to look the other way when strangers or refugees are turned aside. God commands otherwise. Baptism calls us to ministry in the name of Christ and we are tempted to deny our calling in order to fit in to the status quo.

Well, this encounter of Nicodemus and Jesus fits right into that concern about the status quo.

2.

Poor Nicodemus is the focus of today’s gospel lesson and sometimes he doesn’t get much respect. He visits Jesus under the cover of darkness, afraid to be seen. He asks questions that Jesus not only doesn’t answer, but he is confused and flabbergasted by what Jesus does say. He seems to leave as much in the dark as when he arrived.

The focus of this passage is on “starting over.” And starting over is a major aspect of Boot Camp. At a YMCA boot camp some of you might be attending down the block, you start a new

physical fitness regimen. It's a "reset" and it results in you being able to do things you couldn't do before.

But it's hard to start over. When you've spent your whole life watching TV it's hard to get out and exercise. When you've become comfortable with a certain philosophical or political viewpoint it can be hard to see in a new way.

As a college student I worked in my local steel mill during summer vacations. It was very nice of them to hire us and I'm not sure we added a lot of value to their product but we sure have some memorable stories about our work.

One day I was put on a crew that went into a very interesting part of the mill. This was one of these old fashioned mills that used furnaces heated by coal. Everything in the mill and in that part of town was covered by coal dust that hung in the air day and night. There were two kinds of coal powered furnaces in the mill- one to melt the ingredients to make the steel and some other furnaces farther down the line to reheat the steel when it was time to roll it out into slabs and sheets.

One day we students were sent over to a reheating furnace. It had been turned off a few hours before. And when it was barely tolerable we were sent in to clean it out. It was about the size of our choir loft but only about 5 feet high. So we hunched over and went in. The floor was covered with leftover steel and scrap that had bonded to it. So we were given jack hammers to loosen it up and buckets to carry it out. There's still some steel worker out there telling the story about how funny it was to watch us college kids bouncing around on those jack hammers with our backs up against the ceiling.

Although it wasn't ultimately all that funny. Because at that same time new Japanese steel mills were taking over the industry. They had electric furnaces, not coal. And they didn't have people like us using jack hammers because their process was much cleaner and simpler and cheaper. Our community steel mill needed to start over; it needed to replace and rebuild its equipment and re deploy its workers. But it resisted until it was threatened with bankruptcy.

It was hard for them to adjust and reorganize and start over.

3.

Can we do it? Can we leave behind our old ways, our prejudices, our weaknesses? Can we re-build, re-order ourselves, re-form our old ways into new ways?

It seems to me we all have done that sometime in our lives. How many of us have moved from one house to another... from one job to another? Many of us have had other experiences that have started us on new life journeys. Going to college, marriage, children, divorce, death of a loved one—all of these can send us off in new directions.

I'm thinking of my son, Tim, who moved to Chicago this past week. His wife and daughter will follow in about 10 days. He's enjoying the park across the street from his new apartment. He's already been out for morning runs, something that wasn't so easy to do when he lived in Brooklyn. And his wife, Kyo, will join him next week and she's also dreaming about that neighborhood park where she plans to take their baby daughter to play every day this spring and summer. And with her design background she's exploring how to start her own greeting card business at home, or she might find a new job with her old employer, Ralph Lauren, who has another office in Chicago.

We know what she's feeling. Kyo and Tim have been sensing a need to start again, to re-shape their lives. It's scary and it's exciting.

4.

Nicodemus knew that feeling. As a Pharisee, a leader on the council, a teacher, a person who was respected for his spiritual wisdom, he had a relationship with God and with his community that he had worked on for a long time and was satisfied with, until Jesus came along. And something he heard Jesus say, or saw Jesus do, caused him to wonder if he might be missing something important in his journey.

Nicodemus doesn't get the respect he deserves. He had the humility to go to Jesus and risk asking him questions. He risked embarrassing himself, but he listened and kept trying to get the picture Jesus was giving him.

"You have to be born from above." "Born again," is another way of translating it. "Born of the Spirit," Jesus finally says. "Be open to what God's Spirit asks you to understand, where God's Spirit wants to take you, how the Spirit asks you to live in a new way."

Nicodemus shows us some courage—a person who is settled into a comfortable way of living but feels the divine dissatisfaction in his life—the nudges by God's Spirit to take the risk and ask Jesus who challenges him with a deeper spiritual journey.

Nicodemus met Jesus at night when he wouldn't be seen by his community. Nicodemus was guarding his religious traditions by meeting in the darkness. If someone was to see him with Jesus they would question his religious orthodoxy. And that's exactly what Jesus addresses.

"You're all tied up in your religion," Jesus is saying. "You want to talk, Nicodemus, but I want more from you—a re-newed, re-formed relationship with God and with your community. Let my Spirit show you how. And then your deeds will be in God."

Jesus says even religion can become an idol. He says we can love our religion more than we love God or our neighbor. So Jesus urges us to let his Spirit in to re-shape us and re-direct us. We don't have all the answers and we can step into the dark, asking what God has in store for us.

5.

We don't know much more about Nicodemus. How was the rest of his night after his meeting with Jesus? What did he think about? When did it finally make sense? What we do know about him is that he later stood up for Jesus among the Pharisees, and after Jesus had died he took the body and buried it in the tomb from which Jesus would be raised.

It took some time for Nicodemus to understand being born of the Spirit. And it does for us, too. Jesus never says being born of the Spirit is a one-time event. Being baptized isn't the end, it's the beginning of asking Jesus and his Spirit to re-form us and re-shape us throughout our lives.

In the end, Jesus says, our deeds will tell the story about whether or not we are living in God's light. I know God isn't finished with me. Or with any of us.

I've shared with you before how I visited a presbytery in Kenya a few years ago. I visited 30 congregations and worshiped with several of them. I'm sure you've heard how difficult the AIDS epidemic has been in Africa. And one of the reasons it got out of control was that there was prejudice against the people who were sick. They were not welcome anywhere, including churches. Not even the government had any concern for them. One of the larger churches I visited recognized how they were missing the point of their religion -- and their actions were showing it. So they asked God to guide them and they started a weekly support group for AIDS patients. They were among the first to be re-formed.

I'm glad you're here today. We need each other. We need each other's regular support to seek the Spirit of Christ and be re-formed so we can follow him more nearly day by day.