

Sermon - Necessary Risks
Scripture: Genesis 12:1-4a, John 3:1-9
Sunday, March 8, 2020
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Today we continue our Lenten journey together toward Holy Week. These 40 days of preparation commemorate the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry. In our first scripture reading Genesis 12:1-4a God calls Abram and Sarai into the wilderness. We soon understand that this is an invitation to an inner spiritual journey as much as it is to a physical relocation. It is often when one takes the risk of leaving the familiarity and comfort of home and venturing into the unknown, that one discovers anew who they are and their relationship to God. Abram and Sarai follow God's initiative; they risk losing what they know in Ur to what they do not know in Canaan. They risk the possibility of a new future with God. Sarai's barrenness tells us that their life together in Ur was no longer "life-giving." Hear now, God's word.

1 Now the Lord said to Abram (and Sarai), "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 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. 3 I 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." 4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Amen.

Our second scripture reading, John 3:1-9, introduces us to Nicodemus who in some ways represents the Abram who is reluctant to leave Ur. Nicodemus comes by night—mitigating his risk by not being seen with Jesus in the daylight. When Jesus talks about being born anew or from above, Nicodemus' literalism causes him to become fixated and distracted rather than explore the mystery of a spiritual rebirth. John doesn't tell us whether Nicodemus ever leaves his Ur and moves into the wilderness with Jesus, although later in the gospel he defends Christ, and at the end of John Nicodemus helps prepare Christ's body for burial. Perhaps on this night Nicodemus takes the first step in risking beyond what he thought he knew. Listen to what the Spirit is saying:

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He 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." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus 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?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The 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." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Amen.

The title of the meditation: “Necessary Risks”

The text: “Now the Lord said to Abram (and Sarai), ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s home to the land that I will show you.’” Genesis 12:1

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for calling each of us beyond what is familiar to risk with you in the unknown paths and adventures of life and faith. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

“Get Outside the Box” was the theme of the 2020 Association of Presbyterian Church Educators annual event held in Little Rock, Arkansas this winter. Karen Sherrick, Westminster’s Director for Children’s Ministry, and I attended and both agreed the highlight of the gathering was listening to guest lecturer Elizabeth Ann Eckford, one of the original Little Rock Nine, the courageous African American teenagers who enrolled at the all-white Central High School the fall of 1957 following the Brown vs. Board of Education decision by the Supreme Court in 1954.

The necessary risk Elizabeth and the other Little Rock Nine took led the way on the long and winding road to desegregation. Because they were willing to risk, to step out from the safety of their segregated neighborhood and the security of the status quo, our country is a little more just and a little more equitable today.

However, this risk was not without pain and suffering. This risk was not without a willingness to fall down and to pick oneself up, a dying and rising of sorts. This risk was not without looking hatred in the eye and saying “I choose love.” Elizabeth recalled how white students bullied and attacked her verbally and physically daily. As Karen and I sat in the presence of this wise and beautiful matriarch encouraging those gathered to support young people facing discrimination and bullying today, we were overcome with a sense of awe and reverence.

On this International Women’s Day, March 8th, a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women, I would like to lift up Elizabeth Ann Eckford as an extraordinary example of our sisters through the eons who have embraced necessary risks on the journey toward greater equality and to enrich the lives of others.

Today’s scripture readings affirm the necessary risks that are a part of embracing faith and coming into our own as children of God. Abram and Sarai were not told that the journey to Canaan would be without risks, any more than Nicodemus was told that to be reborn spiritually would not mean giving up some of what was comfortable and familiar to him.

None of us is able to participate on our spiritual journey without risk. None of us is able to come into our own without letting go and leaving home, our “Ur,” both figuratively and literally. None of us is able to see the kingdom of God through Jesus’ eyes without moving beyond literalism and being open to a new beginning, a new birth, and a new way of life.

We are each surrounded with the love of this faith community, and yet we are called individually “into the wilderness” toward spiritual maturity. The way is never easy, never without risk; however, as we enter the dimension of possibility on this journey we can count on ourselves and the gentle strength of God’s spirit to persevere the challenges, the insights and the opportunities along the way.

The first step on this journey is a willingness to depart from our securities. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests this about Genesis 12:

The narrative knows that such departure from securities is the only way out of barrenness. The whole of the Abrahamic narrative is premised on this seeming contradiction: to stay in safety is to remain barren; to risk the unknown is to have hope. This is echoed in the invitation of Jesus: 'For whoever would save one's life will lose it; and whoever loses one's life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.'

The second step is a willingness to be honest with ourselves and to take responsibility for our lives and choices. The second step is personal accountability. This calls for a readiness to be confessional. We must give up the search for someone else to blame...It has been said that in generations past we went to a priest to confess our sins, but in this generation we go to a therapist to confess the sins of our parents.

Sometimes we need to confess our parents' sins and sometimes others are to blame. However, a healthy spirituality will be able to make these distinctions so that healing can take place and personal responsibility can grow.

As Jesus longed for Nicodemus to be born anew, we, too, can move beyond a literalism and defensiveness and make new choices to follow the call of the Spirit into the wilderness and new dimensions of possibility. The way through the wilderness is the way of the unknown towards spiritual maturity, self-discovery, responsible freedom, greater justice and necessary risks. By the grace of God goes each one of us. So be it. Amen.

Charge and Benediction

As we go forth in the midst of new dimensions, willing to take the necessary risks on our journey of faith, go in peace, have courage, hold on to what is right, return no one evil for evil, strengthen the faint hearted, support the weak, help the suffering, honor everyone.

And may the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the gentle strength of God's spirit preserve our going out and our coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore. Amen.