

The Second Sunday in Lent  
March 12, 2017

**"A PARADIGM SHIFT"**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Genesis 12:1-4a ~ 3:17

I once heard an interesting story on National Public Radio. It seemed that the leader of the Canadian province of Northwest Territory wanted to change the name of the province because, he said, "Northwest Territory" is not a name; it's a direction. But, it was reported that this man had little chance of getting the legislature to do it. When they held a referendum on changing the name just a few years earlier, the number one choice was "Northwest Territories," followed closely by the number two choice, which was "Bob." Wouldn't it be great to live in a place called "Bob?"

People don't change easily, even when they know they need to. We are creatures of habit, and any change ... even change for the better ... is experienced as loss and a reason for grief. With the pace of change accelerating as it has, we are even more hesitant to let go of the known. This is regrettable, because every one of us has some changes we need to make. We all need to be reformed ... to let go of some bad habits ... to take hold of some good ones. Just ask the people closest to you, if you dare. Maybe they'll be honest with you ... or just send you an anonymous letter. Whenever John has some "constructive" criticism about one of my sermons, he always prefaces it by saying that he overheard one of you say... "maybe it was a tad too long" or "it had a good beat, but you really couldn't dance to it." Do you remember the things that people wrote in your high school yearbook ... things like "stay the way you are and you'll go far." It was meant as a compliment but it sounds now like more of a curse. When I look at my life now, I thank God that I have gone far, precisely because I didn't stay the way I was.

We all need to change at least a little, and some of us need to change a lot. There are times in life when a little fine tuning can make all the difference ... but there are other moments when we need to change stations completely because we have been dancing to the wrong kind of music. I'm talking about a complete overhaul, a 180 change of direction, a total makeover, a new beginning, a fresh start. The sociologists call it a "paradigm shift," which means a whole new structural framework ... an altogether different approach to reality ... an entirely new way of seeing things.

Whether for our good or for our harm, our parents and our friends and our schools and our churches and our television and computers pull tinted, tainted glasses over our eyes from the day we are born. We see the world in a particular way, through their eyes, and most of the time, and we don't even realize there are other ways of seeing the world which may be truer to reality.

Do you believe everything you've been told and shown? What if fine clothes aren't what make you beautiful ... but the way you love people is what makes you beautiful? And maybe the riches really worth having are the friends you can make while you're here. What if God holds

our nation accountable for how we take care of the least of these here at home and around the world? How would that redefine what we call "homeland security" if we feared God more than ISIS?

A relatively recent approach to therapy called "cognitive reframing" leads people to reevaluate their conclusions about events ... to reconsider the motives they ascribed to people ... to rethink their experience in a different light. It's just another way of saying, "Why don't you look at it this way?" People can be resistant to this approach ... not only because it means changing their minds and admitting they may have been wrong ... but because it means changing their behavior in light of reality. A lot of people who wear rose colored glasses will keep them on even when they've been shown the world isn't really the way they see it because they prefer a pink world to the real world, and they don't want to change.

Consider the story of Nicodemus. He slipped around in the dark, trying to meet Jesus secretly. Why did he come at night? He's a Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish people. Jesus has caused a stir among them ... challenged their ideas and their power over the people. So maybe Nicodemus didn't want his cronies to know he was inquisitive about Jesus instead of confrontational. What would the people think of a learned scholar of scripture asking questions of an untrained carpenter from Galilee? Nicodemus was supposed to have all the answers and here he was asking questions.

On the other hand, perhaps he is being crafty. Maybe he's thinking that he might turn Jesus by showing him in private that he can't stand toe to toe with a trained Pharisee. That would be merciful to Jesus and pull off a major coup with his buddies at the same time. Or it might be mainly a matter of access. Nicodemus may have figured that he could get his questions fully answered in a long private conversation rather than taking his turn in the crowds surrounding Jesus during the day. But I wonder if Nicodemus hasn't come to Jesus at night because *night* is when we finally get still long enough to hear the rats gnawing behind the walls of our rose colored worlds. Because in the darkness ... when we're alone with our thoughts ... is when it is hardest to deny that something isn't right about our lives and something has got to change. Is it possible that after a lifetime of study and achievement, Nicodemus realizes that he isn't complete ... that he doesn't have all the answers ... that he needs something more?

Nicodemus begins obsequiously: *"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."* (John 3:2) But Jesus doesn't even let him get to his first question. He interrupts the set up. He cuts right to the chase and nails Nicodemus between the eyes with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the dominion of God without being born from above"* (John 3:3). It doesn't come from tradition or the teaching of the church. It doesn't come from studying philosophy or theology or science. It doesn't come from strict discipline or hard work. It doesn't come from your parents or your culture or your big screen TV or the internet. It comes from God.

But Nicodemus can't see it...he takes Jesus literally, and if you always take the Word of God literally, you aren't taking it seriously. You will probably miss the point ... just like he did. *"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the*

*mother's womb and be born?"* (John 3:4). It makes no sense. It doesn't fit his view of reality, so it must be wrong. Poor Nicodemus is too smart for his own good. Education, experience, age can do that to you ... set you up for failure ... make you proud ... make you think you know everything when you really only know a little ... and not all of what you know is true. Pride is the greatest obstacle to learning and the biggest brake against change.

Jesus is patient. A good teacher, he tries another metaphor. He tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born of the Spirit. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word for "Spirit" and "breath" and "wind" are all one word, *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Listen to the *ruach!* Feel the *pneuma!* The wind blows where it wants and you can't control it. After this week we can all attest that wind comes from somewhere else beyond you. But you feel it. You see its effects. Well, that's the way it is with being born of the Spirit. You can't control it. It comes from somewhere else beyond you. But you feel it. You see its effects. Listen to the *ruach!* Feel the *pneuma* breeze across your life with refreshing newness. Breathe it in. Give yourself to it. Let God's Spirit awaken your life."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus complains. Poor guy...he knows too much and feels too little. The religion of his ancestors and his parents and his teachers and his culture ... even his hard won place in life ... tell him that God has handed down the rules ... and you better follow them or you are going to be zapped. They say that God will condemn you for not obeying perfectly. They say religion is all about being saved from what God will do to you. And this is not a specifically Jewish problem any more than it is a Christian problem among those who worship scripture and discipleship and emphasize holiness over the living God.

Nicodemus was all about knowledge and status and the appearance of righteousness. He put so much energy into studying, memorizing, and following rules that he had no heart for the love of God and the people of God. He had to sneak around in the dark for fear of what his other brothers and sisters will think if he asks questions about his faith out loud. The pressure for public holiness and the threat of condemnation from a criticizing community create a break between the public Nicodemus and the private Nicodemus. The public Nicodemus is steadfast and faithful. Everyone thinks he is a model of righteousness. And they know they aren't that righteous in their own hearts. Well, neither is he, but they don't know that. So they both live in secret shame ... all of them knowing that they don't live up to the hard demands of holiness ... but all of them afraid to talk about it honestly because they might risk rejection by God or at least by God's people. What kind of spiritual community is that ... where people cannot be real enough to be honest about their struggles, doubts, questions, and sins, but must pretend everything is fine even when it isn't? No wonder Nicodemus is sneaking around in the dark.

What's most amazing to me about this story ... is that Jesus didn't make this emphasis on being born again with some degenerate or prostitute or drunk or demon-possessed mass-murderer. He told this to the most religious guy around, the most God-fearing, law-abiding, Bible-totin', scripture-quotin', righteous Pharisee you could find. He tells *that* guy: "You need to start over. You need a paradigm shift. You need to be born from above. You, you proud and noble believer, need to quit talking God and start trusting God. You, you intellectual, hard-working scholar, need to get out of your head before you go out of your mind. You need to trust a God who is bigger than your brain will ever comprehend. You need to be filled by a love that will

accomplish more than your thoughts could ever engage. You, you hard working holy man, need what only God can do for you and you cannot achieve. You need God's grace!

Typical of the gospel of John, it isn't clear in this story where Jesus stops talking and John starts. But the conversation with Nicodemus ends here and the commentary by either Jesus or John begins. In the commentary, we are told, that in the first place, God is not about condemning people but about loving them. And in the second place, we don't believe Jesus because of signs and wonders but because he has come to offer us life and connect us with God. And in the third place, if we believe in Jesus, we do not sneak around in the dark but we come to the light so that our deeds ... some evil and some good ... will be seen and either healed or affirmed. In other words, we don't need to be saved from God. We need to be saved from ourselves, and from each other, and especially from each other's misguided shaming religion.

Jesus comes to take off the fractured glasses of our self-righteousness so we can see we are all alike as sinners. If you think you are better in God's eyes than anybody else or smarter or more approved, then you are lying to yourself and avoiding the truth. Jesus comes to show us a God of love who seeks us out and accepts us *as we are* on the way to making us *what we can become*. If you think God hates some people and loves others ... that God relishes in punishing some while rewarding others ... you are lying to yourself and avoiding the truth. Jesus comes to offer us grace and grace and grace. And Jesus comes to offer us the power to make a paradigm shift ... to start over ... to be born from above.

Maybe you just need a slight correction today ... well, the Lord can help you find the discipline and resolve to make those small changes. But maybe you are at a place in your life where only a whole new direction will do. But you're stuck, you're afraid to change. I suppose we fear change, even change for the better, because it feels like death. But in Christ, dying to self is simply a gateway to new birth and new life, rich and eternal. Don't be afraid to change today. Don't be afraid to be born. Listen to the wind. And let the Spirit of God give you birth from above.

May we pray?

First Lord, show us where and how we need to change, because it's hard for us to see, and harder for us to admit, and hardest of all for us to commit to changing. Then Lord, remind us that grace is not something we have to earn or win or reason our way into, but a gift we need merely to receive like the air we breathe which gives us life and the energy to move forward. So let us feel the fresh wind of the Spirit among us bringing life out of death and new beginnings out of necessary endings and pushing us forward for Jesus' sake, Amen.