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Lent 2, March 8, 2020

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17

A New Way

My recurring dream returned with a vengeance the last few weeks. This dream began in childhood with the bus waiting at the end of the lane while I stand in front of my closet searching for and not finding something to wear among the never-ending array of somewhat familiar, but not really mine, clothes.

Through the years the details of this dream have changed depending on my current life situation. Students waiting in a classroom for me to teach a subject I don't know anything about, without the assistance of books or adequate classroom supplies. A long line of customers waiting at the counter while I start over and over again to ring up the never ending stack of purchases on the conveyor belt in front of me. The end of the semester approaching when I realize I haven't attended any class sessions or completed any assignments for the one remaining class necessary for graduation. A congregation sitting in a church sanctuary while I desperately search for appropriate clothes to wear or realize I've failed to prepare even an outline of a sermon.

I've learned this dream occurs when there's something new, or changing, or unsettled in my life. That uneasy feeling in my subconscious comes out at night in surreal ways. Usually in the light of day, I can identify a situation that needs my attention or, maybe, simply my acknowledgment.

Even before the recurring dreams returned, I've been in a season of waking up in the middle of the night and having difficulty going back to sleep. This is probably somewhat age-related. It could also be something else.

I assume this happens to you as well. Think of a time you woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't go back to sleep. It wasn't due to something you ate or drank, but because your mind refused to quiet down and turn off.

Perhaps you were rehashing something that happened the day before. An argument with a parent, spouse, friend, or child. A success at work or school

Maybe your thoughts centered on events or decisions from the more distant past. Memories, happy and sad, of people no longer in your life. "What if" questions about choices you made. Nostalgia about the way things used to be.

Perhaps you were anticipating the day to come. An important project or presentation that was due. A doctor's appointment you were worried about. A long-awaited vacation that was beginning.

Maybe your mind was busy thinking about the future. Big decisions about where to go to college or making a job change. Worries about money to pay for bills due at the end of the month. Questions about retirement.

Sometimes you might have been pondering "big picture" questions. Who am I? Why am I here? What is God like? How does God work? What is God saying to me?

It's possible that you've not been able to sleep because God is speaking to you – be it directly or indirectly in some form.

I imagine Abram and Sarai, later renamed Abraham and Sarah, lost some sleep over the message they received from God. Think how you would feel if God said to you: *Get up and go! Leave your country. Leave your relatives and your father's home, and travel to the land I will show you. Don't worry—I will guide you there. I have plans to make a great people from your descendants. And I am going to put a special blessing on you and cause your reputation to grow so that you will become a blessing and example to others. I will also bless those who bless you and further you in your journey, and I'll trip up those who try to trip you along the way. Through your descendants, all of the families of the earth will find their blessing in you.*¹

It seems unlikely to me that the next events occurred exactly as they eventually were recorded. This is the way the story is preserved: *Without any hesitation, Abram went. He did exactly as the Eternal One asked him to do. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. He took with him his wife Sarai, his brother's son Lot, all of their possessions, and all of the persons they had acquired for their household while in Haran; and they all set off toward the land of Canaan.*²

It would take some time, however, to get the people, possessions, and animals together before making such a big move. In the meantime, I imagine there were plenty of sleepless nights and discussions as Abram and Sarai wondered about their response to these instructions. Even with a clear message from God, there was much they didn't know about the future. And yet, even with much uncertainty, they set off on this new adventure. How many more sleepless nights did they have in the months and years ahead?

Another person with lots of nighttime questions was Nicodemus.³ Nicodemus was a Jew, a Pharisee. The Pharisees were one of four Jewish groups active in the time of Jesus. Along with the Torah – the Hebrew Scriptures – the Pharisees accepted all the additional traditional Jewish teachings as equally authoritative. They taught that there was a life after death; that the soul was immortal and there was reward and retribution after death. The emphasis of their teaching was ethical – about what you should do – rather than theological – about what you should believe. They wanted to do the right thing so badly that they became very rigid and judgmental. Although the New Testament typically presents them as Jesus' opponents, many of their views were similar to those adopted by early Christians. Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin – the supreme judicial council. Nicodemus was a man of some standing in the community. He was educated and, most likely, was wealthy.

John makes a point of saying that Nicodemus visited Jesus at night. This could be viewed negatively, calling him a coward who snuck around in the dark to visit Jesus so he wouldn't put his standing in the community at risk. A more favorable explanation is that the only time possible to have a long talk with Jesus was at night when there weren't crowds of people around. In fact, the rabbis taught that the Torah was best studied at night when it was quiet and the distractions of the day had subsided. Nicodemus uses his precious study time to ask the big questions that had been keeping him awake.⁴

It's apparent that Nicodemus wants to know more about Jesus. He begins the visit by calling Jesus, Rabbi. He acknowledges that Jesus is a respected teacher. He acknowledges that the miraculous signs Jesus has been performing are evidence that God is present with him.

¹ Genesis 4:1-3, *The Voice*.

² Genesis 4:4-8, *The Voice*.

³ Background information comes from *NRSV Reference Bible with Apocrypha*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, NT 29 and Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible, 6th edition*, McGraw-Hill, 2003, G-44

⁴ Patricia Farris, www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2260, accessed 01/09/2010.

Nicodemus wants to investigate this further. We don't know for sure if his motives are pure or if he wants to discover something to use to discredit Jesus and his followers.

Let's look at two points Jesus makes during this nighttime conversation.

In verses 3-9, Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to be part of the kingdom of God – to be part of the family of God, he must experience rebirth. Nicodemus takes this quite literally, and protests that he can't experience physical birth again. He's a grown man, for goodness sakes. (Not that it would be easier, or even possible for a baby to go back into the womb and be born again.) Jesus emphasizes rebirth in the spiritual sense. Humans can reproduce only human life but the Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. The birth Jesus is talking about is God-initiated transformation.

Nicodemus has trouble understanding this. As a Pharisee, he's used to discussing the specific actions one must take to follow the letter of the law given to the Jews through Moses. He's spent more time talking about what one can and cannot do or what one can or cannot eat than he has talking about who God is and how one can have a relationship with God. Jesus is offering Nicodemus an awesome possibility, that the Spirit can blow through his preconceived notions and open him to the possibility of something new, of new life.

In verses 10-21, Jesus begins to articulate who he is. Jesus says he has authority because he came from heaven and will, in the end, return there. He is the one who will be "lifted up" and, like the healing image of the serpent in the desert found in Numbers 21:19, he has come so that the world might be saved, or more accurately, be healed through him. The purpose of his being lifted up is so that everyone and everything might be made whole and complete. This idea of shalom – wholeness, completeness, the way God intended things to be – is found throughout the entire Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments.

John 3:16 is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible. Along with verse 17, it sums up the gospel, the good news. We're used to hearing these verses from the KJV or NIV. Listen to them from *The Voice*. *For God expressed His love for the world in this way: He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in Him will not face everlasting destruction, but will have everlasting life. Here's the point. God didn't send His Son into the world to judge it; instead, He is here to rescue a world headed toward certain destruction.*⁵

Salvation is all about the restoration of broken relationships. The action starts with God loving the world – the whole world – without qualifications, hesitations, or exceptions. Then Jesus comes in human form to embody God's love – to teach, to heal, to demonstrate new ways of living and relating, to overcome hate and death. God didn't send Jesus to condemn the world; God sent Jesus to save the world. To bring shalom – wholeness, completeness, the way the world was created to be. Those who trust God and follow Jesus, become part of God's family, experiencing spiritual rebirth and transformation.

God called Abraham and Sarah out of their familiar, comfortable home to a land far away. Jesus called Nicodemus to a new way of being, thinking, and doing. In the life of faith, we too need the tools of wonder and curiosity. We need to be willing to move away from predictable and familiar ways of being and doing. What new thing is God asking of you? What new thing is God asking of our congregation? We need to ask these questions during every season of life – as individuals and as Salina Mennonite Church.

The recurring dream, the middle-of-the night sleeplessness, the unsettled feeling, all might be the presence of God saying to you, to me, to us: Leave the familiar behind. I have plans for you. I will guide you. I will transform you. I will bless you. You will be a blessing. You will help bring shalom.

⁵ John 3:16-17, *The Voice*.

At the same time God issues these invitations, God meets us in the anxiety they may cause, assuring us that we are loved and held in God's all-embracing care. Hear these words of assurance from Psalm 121:⁶

I look up at the vast size of the mountains—from where will my help come in times of trouble? The Eternal Creator of heaven and earth and these mountains will send the help I need. He holds you firmly in place; He will not let you fall. He who keeps you will never take His eyes off you and never drift off to sleep. What a relief! The One who watches over Israel never leaves for rest or sleep. The Eternal keeps you safe, so close to Him that His shadow is a cooling shade to you. Neither bright light of sun nor dim light of moon will harm you. The Eternal will keep you safe from all of life's evils, from your first breath to the last breath you breathe, from this day and forever. AMEN

⁶ *The Voice.*