

Gen 12:1-4a, John 3:1-17

Go from Your Country

It is so easy to get comfortable where we are. One of the hardest things that we can do is move. I can still recall vividly many of the moves that Ken and I have made in our lifetime so far. For starters we moved nine times in the first nine years of our marriage. Some of the moves were from one house to another. A few were from one community to another. We lived everywhere from Swan Lake AB to Kamloops BC to Sundre AB. We lived in Drayton Valley for a time and then spent the longest number of years back in our home community of Spirit River. In 2010 we made the biggest and most drastic move of our lives when we went from our community of 1100 people in Northern AB to Toronto. From Western Canada to Eastern Canada. The most recent move, though not so recent anymore, was when we moved to Thunder Bay in 2013.

It might seem that Ken and I are pretty good at taking risks when it comes to moving from one place to another, but some of those moves were really challenging while others were not so much. It was hardest to move when we had settled in for longer periods of time in a certain community. Where we had developed relationships and were involved in the community.

The story of Abram is one of a family on the move. In Genesis we learn about Abram's father Terah taking "his son Abram, his grandson Lot, [who was Abram's brother Lot's son] and Sarai his daughter-in-law (his son Abram's wife) and set out with them from Ur of the Chaldees for the land of Canaan. But when they got as far as Haran, they settle down there." (Gen 11:31)

They didn't get to their intended destination. Somehow, they settled down and, in some ways, maybe they just settled. Maybe the journey became too much, too arduous, too dangerous, too difficult, or maybe Haran just was too nice to move on from. We have no idea. What we do know is that after many years "God told Abram: "Leave your country, your family, and your father's home for a land that I will show you." (Gen 12:1)

"Abram left just as God said, and Lot left with him."

If you are wondering how old Abram was at the time, we are told that he was seventy-five years old when he went from his country. He took his wife and his nephew, "along with all the possessions and people they had gotten in Haran, and set out for the land of Canaan and arrived safe and sound." Thing is, though he had arrived safe and sound, he still moved around through Canaan. Then there was a famine and Abram found himself moving to Egypt before returning once again to Canaan.

The point is that Abram and Sarai were on the move, and if you continue to read the story, they faced challenges and conflict, but never let go of the promise of blessing, for even in the midst of struggle of moving, they knew God was with them. Their movement was from place to place. It meant change and discernment, challenge and discovery, hope and promise.

But there are different kinds of movement in our lives. Sometimes God calls us to move from one place to another physically. It may be a new home or community; it may be to a new job or experience. At other times God calls us to move to a new understanding. Often a physical move is a move to a new understanding, certainly a new experience that leads to understanding, but there are also the times when we are asked to move to a new understanding of how we are to be in the world, or how others are in the world.

Take a look for instance at the experience of Nicodemus. Here was a learned man, a teacher himself, and he comes to Jesus in the dark of night for a conversation. It appears that he had some concern about meeting Jesus in the light of day. It may have been his position in the community and he didn't want that threatened. After all, Jesus was a problem to those who were Pharisees, leaders of the Jews, of whom Nicodemus was one.

Nicodemus says what he thinks and what may have been the talk around town. "Rabbi, [he says to Jesus], we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it." (John 3:2) Nicodemus has come with his understanding of who Jesus is. He doesn't ask a question but rather makes a statement. One cannot be sure what Nicodemus was hoping to learn, but Jesus' words back to Nicodemus seems to come out of nowhere, saying "You're absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to – to God's kingdom." (v3)

Well, that is pretty left field. Nicodemus is trying to figure that puzzle out and fails rather miserably. He takes things literally. He cannot understand that Jesus is speaking about moving from one understanding of what it means to be a follower of God to another. He blurts out, "How can anyone be born who has already been born and grown up? You can't re-enter your mother's womb and be born again. What are you saying with this 'born-from -above' talk?" (v4)

And who of us wouldn't be confused in that moment. As people eavesdropping on the interaction, we get to come to this conversation with the fullness of scripture, knowing how the story of Jesus life, death, and resurrection all plays out. Nicodemus does not have that history or background. So probably good to cut him a little slack.

Thankfully Jesus spends a little more time trying to explain himself, his life's purpose, and the call on Nicodemus to move from one understanding to another. He continues, "Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation – the 'wind-hovering-over-the water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life – it's not possible to enter God's kingdom...the person who takes shape within is

informed by something you can't see and touch." (vv5-6) The conversation does not stop there, but the call is to move to new understanding of what God is up to in the world.

Movement means change. Changing one's physical place or changing one's thinking. It all takes faith, trust, and a willingness to be open to what God is up to in your life and that of others. Movement in these ways means leaving the familiar for something new and deeper and different. At least that is the hope. Moving for the sake of moving, whether physically or in your thinking and being, is not the same as moving because you have discerned that it is God at work in your life. Sometimes moving or making a change is just running away or ignoring circumstances. It takes thought, prayer, discernment, and conversations with other trusted and faithful people to know what God is doing in your life.

And even then, you may not be clear about what is next. You see, we don't know how Nicodemus responded to his conversation with Jesus. We are never told. What we do know is that Nicodemus spoke up and questioned the Pharisees tactics when they wanted Jesus arrested later in the gospel of John (John 7:50) and that he took Jesus body, laid it in a tomb, and prepared the body with spices. (John 19:38-42). He didn't stop being a teacher and ruler of the people, but there was some change in motivation, some risk he was willing to take because of his understanding of Jesus, however limited.

We also know that Abram and Sarai had no road map to follow as they picked up and left the comfort of Haran. They could not have anticipated all of the moves and the famine, the challenges they would face, but that did not stop them from putting one foot in front of the other, trusting that God would lead them. They didn't do anything perfectly, they made mistakes, tripped up more than a few times.

And that may be the take away for us as individuals and as a congregation, as the people of God in the community of faith and in the world. Are you being asked to trust God and go out in faith? Maybe it is to welcome someone new to your circle of friends, maybe it is a call to move from your home to another. Is it a call to move from the comfort of your thinking or how you share your faith with others?

As the church, we are in a time of great uncertainty, yet God is still on the move. God hasn't left the building except to lead us out of our comfort zones and into serving the larger community. We have a great opportunity to move to a new place of being God's people in the world. For some churches it will mean different things, for some it has meant moving from one building to another, for others it has meant closing their ministry all together and bringing what they have to other churches, for some it will mean redefining the mission.

All of it takes courage and a willingness to move to a new place of understanding how God is at work in the world. It will require faith, trust, and a willingness to leave the

familiar, whether it be a physical space or an old familiar way of doing things. Be curious, with the willingness to move to something new and deeper and different.

We do not go alone. That Spirit that Jesus spoke about with Nicodemus goes with us. God is with us. Let's be curious. Let move from the inside of ourselves and our ministries to the outside. Let's be the people of God on the move.