

Sermon 16th March 2014 'Life-giving Wind'
Genesis 12:1-4a John 3:1-17

Prayer:

Wind of God, blow through us and refresh us. Blow through us and heal us. Blow through us and bring us new life. Blow away the things that prevent us from seeing your life in the whole of creation, and show us ways to help the healing of your world. Amen.

Today's addition to the Lenten worship display was a kite, a creature of the wind. We can't 'see' the wind – but we can see the kite, and if we have the string – we can feel the kite-wind engagement. We know the wind exists! I believe it is fully intentional that name of the Spirit of God in Hebrew can be 'Spirit', can be 'breath' can be 'wind' – all attempts to capture the power, the nature, the essential Wisdom of this characteristic of God's Holy presence that gives life.

We know it: we feel it: experience it: recognise it, and we see it, Jesus tells Nicodemus, when we draw from our life's internal faith centre that has been created from it. The Spirit is of God and existed before the beginning with God (Proverbs 8:30) it is not something that arrived in the birth of Jesus! Our belief and understanding in it grew with the birth of Jesus, but God was active with the Spirit long, long before...

Which is why I guess, we have the story of Abram and Sarai as one of our teaching scriptures today. They are among the most important faith ancestors we have –and not only for us as Christ followers, but also for our Muslim and Jewish faith cousins as well. Their story begins with the call of God on Abram's life to go and not know where to, how long, how far, what will happen. I found this map which begins to enable us the 'size' of what Abram and God managed.

This kind of journey has to be the work of the Spirit of God in the life of one man. His acceptance, learning's and life-long deepening belief in the God who called and Spirit who sustained is an awesome example. In these few verses we have God's call and then we have the promise of God's blessing on all peoples of the earth and the establishment of a special partnership between God and Abram's 'family' forever more. *This partnership relationship includes the fact that it is both a blessing for Abram and his family **and** that Abram's family will be a source of blessing for all the people of the earth. (*H Wallace)

I think it might be worth pausing for a moment and linking today with last week – our scriptures in Lent usually take us on a faith history journey. We began with last week's consideration of our faith origins in God in God's garden, Eden. I shared how Walter Brueggemann (*The Theology of the Old Testament, p. 490*) put it this way when he wrote of how the choices made by the first two human beings, Adam and Eve were / are a rejection of the partnership offered by God – on God's terms, between humanity and God.

Brueggemann wrote that there are *subsequent references* in the Genesis narrative (5:1 and 9:16) to the image of God and the promise of covenant with all humankind (9:8-17) which put into play three powerful beliefs in the Genesis narrative: 1. Sin is a rejection of God's offer of partnership with humankind that is meant to enhance all creation; 2. Human rejection is genuinely frightening for its dire consequences; but, 3. God **will not allow** this rupture to overwhelm humankind and the rest of creation." *SacraconversaZione*

God began life offering a partnership deal with humanity and because of our choices it fell over. In the biblical language of Abram's story we hear one of the attempts of God to renew, re-establish, **rebirth** the Divine-Humanity partnership deal. This time because of the increase in belief, understanding and knowledge and exposure of time... the language is of a special 'covenant' an agreement with specific and detailed terms! Can you hear the affirmation that God will not allow our choices to destroy his plan to give life and blessing and belonging, a home to his beloved creation called humanity?

Now just because God will not allow us to ruin his plans does not mean it's a free pass back into Eden! Abram's story proves it – called to trust YHWH God totally for and with his life. H Wallace says Abram was called to "trust the one who calls him through his word from security to insecurity, from the familiar

to the foreign. Abram's journey is the story of Israel, his descendants, the ones who receive Yahweh's promises. In Christian faith Abram's journey also becomes a model of faith (see Heb 11:8-12), picking up on the imperative to go, the uncertainty of the journey, and the fact that Yahweh is only encountered as the journey proceeds into the unknown."

YHWH-God is only encountered as the journey proceeds into the unknown... Terrifying, challenging, fun? Only as we journey into the unknown do we meet God – only as we leave the security of all that we know and control and *have knowledge of* **do we meet God**. Belief in God is not for the faint hearted, and neither is our birthing process! Yet Jesus links the two as he tries to teach Nicodemus about letting go of all that he *knows* in order to 'see' and so know what is happening.

Nicodemus knew a lot – K M-Huey says: "We sense that Nicodemus knows that things aren't so simple. He himself appears to be coming from a place of strength: after all, he's one of "the power elite" among his own people, at least, an educated man in an age when most folks can't even read. A respected leader, he probably lives a relatively comfortable life in material terms. We're used to Jesus being approached by people in urgent need of healing, or food, or forgiveness, and their need makes them vulnerable and open.

Nicodemus, for all of his power and prestige, comes to Jesus in another kind of need: a need for answers, and for help in understanding the answers he gets. It isn't until the end of his conversation that his vulnerability shows, just a bit, perhaps, in his bewildered question, "How can these things be?" We can feel the change in his tone from his first, self-confident words about what "we know."

I wonder if a part of Nicodemus' worry was whether he had things round the right way, if faith, belief and all that 'God stuff' **is so much about us knowing God**, or whether it's about **God knowing us**. Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be born again to see what God was up to – to meet up with God.

Scott Black Johnston offers an interesting perspective on how we can be required to make the decision to be born again: "It is ironic that many Christians treat the question, 'Are you born again?' as if it involves making a decision for God. Yet babies do not decide to be born....Instead, God is the primary player in this passage." And, he says, "The impetus behind God's desire to see us born of the Spirit is love" (The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels). This text, so "bottom-line" for many, has love as the true bottom line. (KM-H)

God's motive and message, for which Jesus is the bearer, is clear: "For God so loved the world...." Abram is an example of faith, one who got up, went and through whom God re-birthed the special relationship through the Covenant partnership. Nicodemus is a reminder that we can over complicate, over conceptualize the simple message of the biblical narratives because we 'know' all about it.

What Jesus kept trying to tell us is that God has, is, always will seek a partnership with each and every person **and**, it seems, will go to any extreme to reach us with that offer out of a single motive. God has clearly announced the motive for this offer—love, just as Jesus announced to a stunned Nicodemus that to learn to believe it we must be born from above – born again of the Spirit, of God.

Belief in this context is not intellectual assent – Nicodemus learnt that, and Jesus leads us to contemplate it as trust – like Abram, trust and faithfulness that God is 'there' – around us like the wind. There is a promise that this grows with exposure! The longer we journey, the more time in relationship we have the deeper our belief in what we can't see but 'know exists'. As we step out in faith and trust and just maybe pushed now and again by 'wind' gusts, **or** life's shadowed valleys, we grow in understanding and knowledge.

We *know* we stumble and fall as much as we experience mercy and grace so we grow in faith, trust and belief like the way we sing it in the Youth Band song– 'From the inside out'. How can this be? Because God so loves us so much that he gave Jesus, through whom we have the Wind/ Spirit of God who gives us life. Thanks be to God. Amen.