

Lifting up your eyes

Second Sunday in Lent,

Genesis 12: 1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

Mar 12, 2017

"I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come?" Psalm 121 begins with a question and the answer immediately follows; "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

Lifting up our eyes, physically and spiritually, draws us out of ourselves; out of our fears and limitations, out of our isolation, out of our pain and pettiness and allows us to see the world. In the readings this week we are encouraged to lift up our spiritual eyes and to have faith in the God who brings us new life.

I have a few questions from our readings this week:

- How do we understand the phrase 'born again' and how do we live into that promise of new life?
- What are the meeting places, where people feel safe to bring their questions about things of the Spirit?
- How do we 'lift up Jesus' so that people who are in the darkness can see the source of light?

Let's hold those questions for a time, and begin with Abraham...

In Paul's letter to the Romans he talks about Abraham, the faith ancestor of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, and how he was blessed, not primarily because of what he did, but because of his faith in the God who told him to 'go'. So he went. It was faith, not adherence to law, that allowed the grace of God to bless him, to bring new life when he and Sarah were so old, to count his descendants as numerous as the stars. Lift up your eyes Abraham and walk on in faith. 'So Abraham went...'

In the gospel story, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, with eyes full of the 'signs that you do'. In the previous chapter, Jesus has not trusted himself to the ones who have believed because they have seen the signs that he was doing. Faith based on miracles is not enough and Jesus knows the inside of people's hearts. He knows Nicodemus, the Pharisee, before he even speaks. Here is an encounter between two men; it also represents an encounter between the Jewish faith and the early Christian church. It's dark and dangerous, and questions need to be asked and answered. Nicodemus begins by telling Jesus that 'we know who you are because we have seen what you do.' Jesus throws a curly reply, 'you can't see the work of God unless you have been born from above/again.' The trick here is that the word Jesus uses has a double meaning. Nicodemus picks up on the literal interpretation and wonders how anyone can return to the womb and be born a second time. He has not lifted his spiritual eyes because he is unable to do that, he's stuck in the world of flesh and blood. His thinking is too narrow. He is too closed to hear Jesus' words of new life.

The conversation continues and Jesus talks about the wind, blowing where it will. Wind and Spirit are the same word in Greek; *pneuma*, breath. You can see the movement of the wind in the trees, as it blows where it will. You can see the movement of the Spirit in the world, as she moves amongst creation, where she will, if your eyes are open and lifted.

Nicodemus is bemused. Then Jesus says that the Son of Man must be lifted up, which also means lifted up and crucified. If we look up, if we lift our eyes in faith, if we look and see with our spiritual eyes the one who brings God to us, we will have life. As theologian Bill Loader describes, we will be drawn into relationship with, 'the love nexus that brings life'. We will be born from above.

The final part of this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus has been used many times as a summary of the faith. For God so loved the world... The God of Abraham, the God who was lifted up on a cross, reaches out to us with a gift of blessing – this divine love that yearns to fill people with love, not to judge us, but to give us outrageous and abundant life.

Let's return to those questions:

- I wonder if being 'born again' means being open to Divine Love, the love nexus that brings life. Letting go of legalism and the constraints of often unhelpful and exclusive 'religious' rights and wrongs and lifting our eyes to experience and wonder at the mystery of God with us. Seeing others and all of creation with the lifted eyes of our souls. Seeing our kinship and our connectedness rather than our differences and our distance.

