

Lent 2A; March 20, 2011; Baptism

Genesis 12:1-4a; Ps. 121; Romans 4:1-5; 13-17; John 3:1-17

In February of 2006 Bantam books published a trade paperback by Kris Radish which proved to be so popular that it was reissued within two years. Annie Freeman's *Fabulous Traveling Funeral* imagines the journey of several women honouring the last instructions of their dear friend to spread her ashes at several locations which had been turning points in her life. Asked to put aside their regular routines and patterns they came together to travel, to remember, to ask questions, to grieve and to celebrate. One might think it is a book of sorrows but really it is about not missing the opportunity to embrace the fullness of life. The book and its teachings resonate very well with the texts of scripture today and with what I want to call the fabulous traveling baptism of William Thomas Ferring who has come from Geraldton to be held in the arms of his grandfather and welcomed as a fellow traveler in the Christian faith journey. It is easy to see those who have traveled to be with him. I hope he will know that this action is meant to be a turning point for him.

Also leaving home were Abraham and Sarah, responding to God's invitation to travel, to find a new place which will hold a blessing for them and beyond them. I imagine some grieving and questions and a challenge at their age when such a change could not have been easy. Would they be safe? What was in store for them? Was today's psalm on their lips or in their hearts; would God really guard their going out and their coming in?

Perhaps Nicodemus thinks that he is in charge of his going out and coming in. His name means 'conqueror of the people.' It may be that he thought he would lead, command and navigate his own security as well as that of others. But he comes to Jesus. He comes at night, in the dark; maybe he won't be seen. Jesus tells him that he must be born again. This darkness is a womb time, full of the possibility of new life; there is a promise of transformation.

"Jesus told him that he needed to start his life over. As a conqueror of the people he could function well in the kingdom of Pharisees and in the kingdoms of the Roman and Jerusalem politicians but the kingdom of God needs another orientation. To even see the kingdom of God Nicodemus would have to start again from the beginning." Jesus represents the way of compassion, of servanthood, of power with and for others. Nicodemus was clear about rules and discipline but needed to begin again if he was to understand and embrace the mystery and spirit of a full faith. We know nothing about how this happened for him but we will see him after Jesus has died; he becomes a part of that traveling funeral.

The gospel passage reveals a shift from this story to pronouncements; we can see the hand of its editor. John 3:16 has been used by many who call themselves 'born again.' I used to cringe when I saw the citation on bumper stickers, deciding immediately and with bias that I did not like the driver of that car. My own faith life has had many birthings, many turning points. A full faith life has many baptisms, many points of transformation. I have been invited to travel, to ask questions, to let go of old patterns and

assumptions and to embrace new ways of seeing a life in the spirit of Jesus. I suspect that many of you have had more than one birthing in faith too.

Once a visiting priest asked my parish in Boston to quote John 3:16, not an easy task for Episcopalians. But they recognized this passage since it is used in the service as a comfort sentence before the confession of sins. Then he asked them what was John 3:17. They were silent and I was annoyed thinking that he had meant to embarrass them. He wanted them to know that he believed that God's intent was not condemning the world but saving it through the gift of the Christ. But the old language of saving makes it hard to hear clearly. What if saving the world really means making it safe? Safe for William to grow up? Safe for all of creation? Safe from war, disaster, abuse? Safe from fear, from not living a full life? What if God meets us all in darkness so that we might live in the fullness that God intends?

The other evening at a parish meeting I heard someone say that the church is the only place where he feels safe. He feels safe to speak, to be himself, to be valued, allowed to make mistakes, to grow. He is a person willing to show up in the daylight as well as in the dark times of hard decisions. I believe that the purpose of the church is to set people free. Jesus comes to Nicodemus and to us not as a conqueror but as a liberator. It is okay to start your life again.

Amen+

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