



Lent 2, Year A – March 20, 2011

John 3. 1-17

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

Imagine the silence; that profound sense of quiet where all of the noises and clamber of everyday life fade into oblivion. The kind of silence that surrounds you, embraces you, encompasses you and fills your senses in the absence of distraction. In that silence the flutter of butterfly's wings would vibrate loudly in your ears and a whisper may seem like a shout.

It was in this silence that I imagine God speaking to Abram. "Abram", the whisper piercing the quiet, vibrating loudly in his ears, "Abram, I have given you a good long life. I will now take you away from everything you have come to know, away from almost everyone you have ever known and show you a place that will become yours. I will bless you and those who bless you. Come, Abram, come."

And Abram said yes. Abram, the first person to receive a sign from God that humanity has not been forsaken and that despite of their bad behaviour, God continues to love them. God changes strategy here, speaking to one family rather than the whole of God's people, in hopes that through them humanity might be restored. God's chosen people never exist in isolation. They are called to a wider mission than just self-preservation. They are never allowed to claim an exclusive hold on God's concern. God remains committed to all creation and all humanity. Abram embodies such blessing and help to other nations within his own lifetime through his assistance to his nephew Lot and his bold intercession on behalf of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:22-33) and his covenant with King Abimelech (Genesis 21:22-34). Abram, the first person to blindly obey – not because of doctrine or scrolls but because of faith, Abram says yes.

Abram says yes.

In today's gospel we have Nicodemus, another person who has direct contact with God in the form of Jesus but, unlike Abram, he initiates the contact. Good first move, one might say, seeking Jesus out late at night to get to know more from this new teacher on the scene. But unlike Abram, Nicodemus is not open to what he is hearing.

Now Nicodemus would have come to Jesus because he was in Jerusalem causing quite a stir. Jesus had gone from Galilee to the temple during Passover and overturned the tables of the money changers in his father's house. He was calling the leaders of the temple out on their bad behaviour, begging them to get back to basics. Now, we never hear of Jesus sleeping in Jerusalem so I imagine him going out of the city through the Golden Gate, down through the Hebron valley, up the Mount of Olives and down into Bethany. It was in Bethany that Jesus had friends, Martha, Mary & Lazarus, where he often stayed. I imagine Jesus taking to his most faithful followers, perhaps in a small home or in a courtyard, late into the night when Nicodemus arrives. And he arrives curious about this new comer on the one hand, but so entrenched in his own position on the other that he is not really prepared to hear anything.

Do you know anyone like this? Those people who seem to ask questions but who are not really interested in the answers? Those people who seem to be seeking something but who are really so entrenched in their own "superior" knowledge that anything new just washes over them. While it is hard to say whether Nicodemus, a leader of the Jewish people himself, was being purposely obtuse or if he was just really that dim, there is no question that in the face to face meeting he had with Jesus he didn't really hear a thing. The gospel doesn't tell us whether he went off

and changed his life or just remained so ingrained in his position that he didn't really understand what Christ was telling him. I get the feeling that in his stubbornness to not comprehend, Nicodemus didn't say yes.

And what a shame. It is in this reading that we have the most famous quote of all of the New Testament. If you watch football games you might think of a guy in a wildly coloured wig holding up a sign that simply says "John, 3.16."

So hear again what Jesus says. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." That much. That's how much God loves you. When you come face to face with that un-earnable, freely offered so that it might be freely received love, how can you turn away?

Nicodemus, I believe, was so entrenched in his own "right-ness", in his own "correct-ness", that he could not possibly accept the enormity of what was being offered to him.

Can you?

In Lent we are called to reflect, to receive, and to engage in our relationship with God. So if you are blessed with a moment of silence, a moment where the sounds of the world can slip away, when God's whisper calls to you will you become belligerently obtuse as Nicodemus did or will you, like Abram, say simply "yes".

I call to you to open your ears, open your minds, and open your hearts to hear the whisper that is God. And when you did I call on you to say, I receive the love that has been so freely offered. I call on you to say "yes".