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### *A Fresh Start: Journeys with God*

This week we are a step further along our Lenten journey, the journey that's taking us right to Jerusalem, if we're taking it seriously, straight to all the events of Easter. Along the way, there'll be places of stumbling, places where it feels dark, times when we're not sure what's ahead of us, but today we find out that like Abram and Sarah, like Nicodemus, we're not alone. God is with us along the way, revealing and teaching and always bringing us into renewal and wholeness.

Today's readings start out with the story of Abraham and Sarah, a story which twists and turns through much of the book of Genesis. The Abraham story begins with the words, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house..." Abram is told to leave the world of his ancestors, to leave his relatives and his family, and to set out on a journey that will lead him to new relationships and new territory. He steps out into the dark, into the unknown, and he doesn't know where he's going, but only that God has promised....

In the story of Abram who becomes Abraham, and Sarai who becomes Sarah, we meet the God who promises new life to those who hear, trust, and follow him. This is the God who promises that, despite their age and despite their inability to conceive a child, they will become the ancestors of a great nation, and God will bless them.

Like Abraham and Sarah, God calls us to risk; a risky step of faith that takes us into a new experience of God's Kingdom; a way of living that's deeper and more meaningful, a path that takes us away from our materialism and our reliance on ourselves.

This is the first of two stories today that speak about a journey into the unknown. The purpose of Lent isn't deprivation for its own sake, it's about a journey that's designed to take us to new life, and new thinking. Lent is about remembering Abraham and Sarah and heeding their example of faith and moving into the unknown to follow God's call. Lent is about hearing the words Nicodemus heard: that to enter

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into God's Kingdom, we must be born again; born in a new way that turns upside down the values of our world, and gives us a fresh start. It's about encouraging us to trust, and to risk, about stepping out with the promise of new life.

Nicodemus, who was a leader and a man who knew the Jewish scripture back to front, came to speak with Jesus. He came when it was dark, for a secret, private meeting away from the crowds. It was a safe place to ask a question, to ponder the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven with someone who appeared to have some answers. But when Nicodemus came to Jesus, he didn't come with a question. Instead, he opened the conversation by telling Jesus who he thought he was. He said, 'I have seen your miracles and all the signs, and I know that you are from God. I know who you are.' And Jesus answered him, 'No, you haven't a clue. You saw me supply wine for the wedding feast, you've seen me heal the sick, and bring the dead to life and you think you can draw logical, rational conclusions from all this evidence. You think you know it all, but really you know nothing about faith. Faith involves commitment and risks. Slipping over here in the dark of night in order to tell me who I am is not what faith's about.'

Then Nicodemus does start to ask questions, 'How? How can this happen? How can these things be?' And Jesus answered his 'how' questions with a birth story.

Perhaps Jesus knew that the questions which had driven Nicodemus to come and speak to him at night, in the dark, weren't intellectual ones, they were probably more like 'Who am I? Why was I born? Where do I belong? How can I be at peace with who I am?'. These are the kinds of questions which keep us up at night. But the only questions Nicodemus knew how to ask were rational, intellectual ones. So instead of answering his questions, Jesus told Nicodemus a story of a different kind of birth, a story of being born of the Spirit.

Jesus tells him that faith is born of the Spirit, a Spirit that blows like the wind, blows where it chooses, blows and we hear the sound of it, but we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. Life in God's kingdom can't be earned or achieved.

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To be born of the spirit would mean letting go of all his old securities. To be born of the spirit would mean trusting that God loved him. Jesus was trying to get Nicodemus to live outside the box of his old perceptions. He said to Nicodemus, as he says to us: ‘Come and be renewed with a new birth that will transform you into a new person, that will give you a fresh start and new opportunities’.

It seems to me that we are not so different from Nicodemus. We spend a lot of time struggling to find out how to win God's favour, trying to figure out how to be good people, and all the time God is giving us birth, breathing life into us, pushing us out into a new life that we can live in God's presence, providing us with all the resources to be who he calls us to be. And so often, like Nicodemus, we miss the point.

What would it mean for us to understand that we are born of the Spirit? What if we were to stop telling God what we know, to see that God is bigger than our boxes or our imagination, what if we were to allow the wind of God's Spirit to just sweep over us. What if we didn't hold back and simply let this spirit wind take us to places that aren't on our agenda? What then.....?

We're not told what happened to Nicodemus, but as we read further in this Gospel, we see that he continued to be a follower of Jesus. As we follow Abraham and Sarah's story, we see that they were willing to trust God, to leave what they knew to be true, to go where they had never been, to go away from all their familiar markings and reference points. They stepped out into the unknown and they allowed their lives to be reshaped by the One who came to them in a birth story.

The invitation to Abraham and Sarah, the invitation to Nicodemus, the invitation to us, comes as a birth announcement. To be born of the wind is to trust our life to the God who gives birth to us. To be born of the wind is to embrace the mysterious newness of God knowing we do not have a final hold on the Holy Spirit. To be born of the wind is know that we are loved.

As we set out on our journey this Lent, drawing ever closer to the cross and to the hope of Easter, we may not know where we're heading, sometimes we may even doubt whether God's promises are real. We might stumble along the way, just like

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Abraham and Sarah did. We may feel as if we're walking in the dark, we may come to Jesus with tough questions, sometimes we may miss the point just like Nicodemus. But let us not forget, God is with us on this journey. And the point of the journey is to draw us closer and closer to the fulfilment of the promise, and into new birth and new life.

## *Lent 2*